



a
true
story

A beautiful, sensuous and rich widow is brutally murdered in the most questionable of circumstances. The last person to see her alive is her brother-in-law and lover—a man later found guilty on circumstantial evidence.

Not until the condemned man appealed did a witness come forward and admit that he had given false evidence.

How did she die? Who was the other mysterious lover to whom she constantly penned saucy letters? Why did the witness lie?

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ALEX JOSEY

THE MURDER OF A BEAUTY QUEEN

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TRUE CRIME CLASSICS

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ALEX JOSEY

Author of Lee Kuan Yew: The Crucial Years

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CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| Introduction | 5 |
| Circumstantial Evidence | 17 |
| The Murder of Jean Sinnappa | 19 |
| A Definition of Murder by Justice Azmi | 25 |
| The Trial | 43 |
| The Perjurer | 181 |
| The Preliminary Inquiry | 195 |
| A Reporter Interviews Dr Warnasurya | 209 |
| About the Author | 211 |

For Review only

INTRODUCTION

THERE ARE TWO WAYS OF LOOKING AT THIS TRAGIC STORY OF THE SAVAGE MURDER OF THE LOVELY, SENSUAL BEAUTY QUEEN, JEAN SINNAPPA.

There is the love angle, generated partly by torrid love letters (some described in court as being obscene), and partly by Jean's own frank attitude towards sex.

Then there is the legal aspect, the broken link in a chain of circumstantial evidence which at the trial was sufficient to convict one of her lovers of murdering her. This is the side of the case which fascinates me: I am prepared to accept a woman's right to have lovers and, like men, deliberately to select them. Why condemn a promiscuous woman because she likes being loved by different men, and not equally blame men for sleeping with different women? George Simonen, the famous writer of crime stories, claims to have slept with 10,000 different women during an active sex life which spanned nearly 70 years. Nobody condemned him!

Ideally, men and women should lead moral lives, husbands and wives sleeping together, and with nobody else sampling the joys of sex. This seems to be the attitude adopted by a writer in a Singapore Chinese-language newspaper. A striking headline indicates what is to follow:

For Review only

THROUGH LOVE SHE LIVES AGAIN ...
 THROUGH LUST SHE HAD TO DIE ...
 SHE KNEW THE HAPPINESS OF HEAVEN
 AND THE FRIGHTFULNESS OF HELL ...
 TWO LOVERS TWO DIFFERENT WORLDS

Jean was an enigmatic female who existed in both spiritual and physical worlds. Though she wanted the most perfect kind of love, at the same time she desired the pleasures of the flesh. And this second best world which she pursued dominated after all. But like most 'best' things in life there was a price to be paid. Jean died, in her prime, in the midst of love and lust. This was the case which stirred the emotions of millions of people in Singapore and Malaysia. Jean's beauty, style, and seduction were moving, but yet more moving was the relationship between her and her brother-in-law, and the sexual world which she inhabited rapturously with her secret lover, the triangular affair which led eventually to her cold-blooded murder.

The Jean Sinnappa case can be said to have been the most exciting and torrid romance in the history of Malaysia.

Jean has been compared with Lady Chatterley in Lawrence's novel, but Jean was more passionate, more colourful than the British noblewoman.

Jean Sinnappa was not only endowed with natural beauty, her wealth and her flirtatious

nature, made her very desirable to men. Her own brother admitted that she was a woman of tremendous passion. When she was chosen as beauty queen her voluptuous figure was displayed in front of many men. She was truly unforgettable. She was uninhibited.

She married Sinnappa the civil servant. Their marriage seemed to have been normally happy. But apparently, after they were wed, Sinnappa soon discovered her overwhelming sexuality. Night after night, when Sinnappa was unable to satisfy her sexual urge, he took to drink. Jean started to wander, and the number of men interested in her multiplied. Among them were her brother-in-law, Karthigesu (later to be accused of murdering her) and the mysterious Sri Lankan doctor.

Unable to satisfy her, Sinnappa drove himself further to the bottle. Shortly before he died he drank too much at a dinner engagement and he died in a car crash. Thus Jean's amorous nature can be said to have resulted in a man's death. This is the substance of tragedy. Overnight Jean became a wealthy widow. With a fortune of half a million she became even more notorious. Enamoured with her was the man who had stood in the wings all along, quietly watching, Karthigesu.

To many, Karthigesu was a gentle, mild and warm person. He would not hesitate to help any friend in trouble. He was someone who wouldn't

For Review only

harm a fly. How could he murder a woman? Thus, when he was accused of being Jean's murderer, the person who had plunged the knife with such force into her breast, his friends refused to believe him possible of such violence.

As for Jean, she was living with Karthigesu. Yet simultaneously she was carrying on surreptitiously with the Sri Lankan Doctor W. This enjoyment of the favours of both men aroused Karthigesu's rage.

At this stage the writer broke off to give a Chinese traditional reaction to the relationship between brother-in-law and sister-in-law. He wrote:

The Chinese observe much decorum in all their relationships: the elder brother is looked upon as a father, and an elder brother's wife as a mother. Jean was Karthigesu's sister-in-law, and although they were not Chinese, there still ought to have been decorous distance between a brother-in-law and sister-in-law.

The writer doesn't hesitate to blame Jean for this. He wrote that Jean didn't even spare her own brother-in-law from her lustful clutches. 'What a sensual creature!', the writer exclaimed, making no comment at all on the behaviour of Karthigesu. Wasn't he equally to blame? Oddly enough, the writer had decided that in this entire affair the villain of the tale is the Sri Lankan, Dr W. He wrote:

Born in Sri Lanka, he stayed there until he graduated in medicine. He was a model husband to his wife Ira who could never have imagined her husband capable of journeying to Kuala Lumpur to become ensnared with Jean's charms and wealth. The Doctor was Jean's quarry, almost wrecking his home and ruining his reputation. This was a lesson he will never forget. Yet the writer spits on him!

Strictly speaking Dr W. was not a great lover. But the numerous times he spent with Jean in the YMCA had serious repercussions, finally getting his lover slain. Not only did he not mourn her, he demonstrated his cowardice by staying away from Kuala Lumpur after her death. What a callous creature! Were Jean to know about it now, she would hate this blackguard.

What intemperate language to use to describe the behaviour of the hapless Dr W.! He sensibly stayed away from Kuala Lumpur and the murder trial because his lawyers reasonably advised him that his presence in Malaysia could not help in any way. Besides, it is hard to imagine that the doctor did not mourn Jean secretly. The writer goes on:

Jean was not only beautiful, she was naturally outstanding. In her youth she had already attracted the interest of many men. When she appeared in society the men who lusted after her

For Review only

increased in number. At school she was an average pupil, but she matured earlier than other girls and her beauty and her arresting figure made her stand out from others. Wherever she happened to be, there would always be men, swarming around her, jostling for her affection. Her choice of Sinnappa was the beginning of her tragedy. Sinnappa's car crash came at a meaningful time of his life. He was educated and led an active life. His marriage to Jean had produced three lovely children. His premature death perpetuated this strange tragedy. His death enabled Jean and Karthigesu to begin their romance, and her roving spirit lured the amorous Dr W. into her bed.

Jean's death has been described as a most unusual case because nobody can truly determine who killed her. From time immemorial men have longed to have a wholly devoted and faithful lady love. Love cannot be shared. Thus when Jean refrained from committing herself wholly to either man the tragedy began. Jean was stabbed in a car driven by Karthigesu, and Karthigesu was found unconscious a short distance from the car. From the wounds on her body Jean had put up a great struggle. She did not intend willingly to die. Like a flower in full bloom, beautiful, admired by many, Jean even in her wildest dream could not have envisaged that life would be so brief. She was only 33 when she died.

Apart from Jean, no-one knows the identity of the murderer, and there is no way Jean can satisfy the many curious people who would like to know who killed her. However, surveying the entire scene we can see that Jean loved Karthigesu deeply; they had already been living together without legal rites. Jean's little daughter regarded Karthigesu as a father. Even when Sinnappa was alive, Karthigesu was like a foster father to the children. As for Jean, she even kissed Karthigesu's feet in much the same way any Indian wife would treat her husband. If her Sri Lankan lover had not suddenly emerged, Jean and Karthigesu would probably have tied the marital knot long before.

After her death two sets of love letters were found. These were Jean's love letters to Dr W. and her letters to Karthigesu. The first set shows the love which had developed between a young widow and her unmarried brother-in-law. Those from her to Dr W. and Dr W's letters to her reveal their consuming passion. Were Jean an ordinary woman she could have established a steady relationship with Karthigesu and spent the rest of her days a happy and contented woman. Heaven, however, had given her the role of a vain and lustful female from which she was unable to extricate herself. From these letters it is obvious that Jean was a woman who really enjoyed her sexuality. She was always admiring the powerful

For Review only

embraces and presence of the virile male. Her Sri Lankan lover made use of this weakness of hers to satisfy his own desires. Even when he was far away from her he found her passionate letters very difficult to dismiss.

Jean looked towards the fulfilment of desires of the flesh all her short life. In her letter to Karthigesu there is this paragraph: 'The weekend is over in a flash; but I always long for it to arrive. I am happy just to see you and to hear your voice but it is hardly enough. I feel that we are separated by an impenetrable wall, which prevents me from touching you, to be clutched in your tight embrace, your lips, ever so warm, pressing close to mine ...'

In another letter Jean sent this daring wish to Karthigesu: 'That night I really should have kissed you all over, used baby oil to massage your whole body, then you would have no choice but to respond, and you could take possession of me completely. Ah, my love, I think of you every night ...'

Jean fantasized a lot about the male body, easily forming an obsession ... furthermore her sexy body made men wild. Take her affair with the Sri Lankan: both seemed to ignite like dry firewood. In the short span of between three and four months the doctor wrote Jean 19 bold love letters. In the very first letter the doctor wrote with

passion: 'We may be separated, but our love is as tempestuous as a typhoon or a raging inferno. My heart's fire is ablaze. I am unable to expel you from my thoughts ...'

The doctor travelled from Kuala Lumpur to Bangkok, not forgetting each time to tantalise her. From these vulgar love letters it is apparent that Jean had always harboured fantasies about men. In this way the flirtatious doctor began his affair with the widow, with disastrous consequences. Jean's whole life seems to have been controlled by love, and it was for love that she had to die.

The doctor's letters were passionate, but terribly insincere. Because all his letters contained countless sexual allusions, they could not be read out in Court. He posed as a great Romeo. He did not however wish to abandon his wife and family: he wanted Jean to become his mistress. One letter he sent to Jean admitted that he was a 'weak' lover. He was reluctant to give up their affair, but he was afraid his wife would find out. That was why in 8 out of 10 letters he begged Jean to keep the letters in a safe place. One of the letters said: 'I only wish you were in my bosom every night, your gentle warm body, full of life, your wonderful figure fill me with ecstasy. Do you know my love I want to embrace you with every ounce of my being tonight, until we both drop off to sleep out of fatigue ...'

For Review only

WHO'S WHO

The doctor proposed to Jean on a false pretext saying he could not live without her. On the other hand he was apprehensive that society would not accept this sort of relationship.

Jean existed in the middle of two lovers, one of whom she loved with deep passion, the other after whom she lusted. Jean's whole life was the pursuit of this sort of love and lust. In the final analysis, her life was buried beneath the world of fleshly pleasure ...

That is the conclusion one writer reached. That is one way of looking at this tragic tale of love and murder. There is another, equally as absorbing, and that is the strictly legal aspect of the trial in which a case is made against the accused based entirely on circumstantial evidence, a chain patiently built up and made credible enough to cause a majority of the jurors to return a verdict of 'Guilty of Murder'. Sentenced to hang, Karthigesu appealed. Then it was that the chain of circumstantial evidence broke when a witness admitted perjury. For that reason, and for others concerning the admissibility of evidence, which the Appeal Judges ruled should never have been placed before the jury, Karthigesu was freed. He was found 'Not Guilty' and acquitted.

Whichever way the case is looked at, we are left with the tantalizing question: Who murdered Jean Sinnappa? Why was she murdered?

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Jean Sinnappa | The Murder Victim |
| S. Karthigesu | The Accused |
| Justice Mohammed Azmi | The Trial Judge |
| T.S. Sambanthamurthi | Deputy Public Prosecutor |
| Dr Narada Warnasurya | Jean's Sri Lankan Lover |
| Mr R. Ponnudurai | Defence Counsel |
| Mr Jeffery Fernandez | Defence Counsel |
| ASP Ramli Yusof | Senior Investigating Officer, Petaling Jaya Police Station |
| Professor G. Devadass | Consultant Psychiatrist, University Hospital |
| Dr R. Krishnan | Pathologist, University Hospital |
| Professor Eric Sumithran | Consultant Pathologist, University Hospital |
| Adrian de Silva | Prosecution Witness |
| Tan Tiong Keng | Prosecution Witness |
| Dr S. Balakrishnan | Attached to University Hospital |

For Review only

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|---------------------------|---|
| Mr Wan Adnan bin Mohammed | Magistrate at Preliminary Inquiry |
| Dr Yahya Sofi bin Hussein | Medical Officer Attached to Dept of Surgery |
| Andrew Brian Perera | Jean's Brother |
| Cpl K. Ramakrishnan | Police Dog Handler |
| Bandhulananda Jayatilake | The Perjurer |
| Ng Kwai Yew | Defence Witness |
| Datuk (Dr) M. Mahadevan | Senior Consultant Psychiatrist to Health Ministry (Defence Witness) |
| Justice Ajaib Singh | Perjury Case Judge |
| Justice Wan Suleiman | Appeal Judge |
| Justice Abdul Hamid | Appeal Judge |
| Justice Hashim Yeop Sani | Appeal Judge |

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE

Few murders, especially premeditated murders, are ever witnessed. Most murderers are convicted by circumstantial evidence.

A Singapore judge once told a jury there were two things he had to tell them about circumstantial evidence. The first was that it was the cumulative effect of all the evidence that was important, not one isolated link in the chain of circumstantial evidence. The cumulative effect of every one of the links had to be considered together, not individually. One had to consider circumstantial evidence in its totality, the judge told the jury. The second thing to draw their attention to, he continued, was that the question in that case (the trial of Sunny Ang), depending as it did on circumstantial evidence, was whether the cumulative of all the evidence led to the irresistible conclusion that it was the accused who committed the crime (murder of Jenny, a barmaid). Or was there some reasonably possible explanation such as, for example, was it an accident? The emphatic answer was 'No'. It was no accident. It was premeditated murder. Sunny Ang had murdered her. He was sentenced to death and was hanged.

For Review only

No one concerned with the violent death of the beauty queen schoolteacher, Jean Sinnappa, could doubt for one moment that she had been brutally murdered. The question was who had plunged the knife deep and savagely into her breast. The Prosecution gathered circumstantial evidence in an attempt to prove that the guilty person was Jean's brother-in-law, S. Karthigesu. By a five to two majority, the jury found him guilty. The judge concurred with the verdict and sentenced Karthigesu to death. He appealed, and it was during this appeal that one of the 48 witnesses confessed that his evidence was untrue. His sworn testimony were lies. The perjurer had destroyed the chain of circumstantial evidence.

The three Appeal Judges deliberated for more than an hour. In allowing Karthigesu's appeal against conviction and sentence, Justice Wan Suleiman said the court was satisfied that some inadmissible evidence was admitted and placed before the jury. He added that no reasonable jury properly directed would have found Karthigesu guilty. The judge said that in considering the appeal, the court considered not only the additional evidence (that there had been perjury), but also the other grounds put forward by the appellant.

THE MURDER OF JEAN SINNAPPA

Vivacious, passionate and rich, beautiful 33-year-old Jean Sinnappa had been a beauty queen. Jean, a schoolteacher, was a widow with three children. Her husband had died in a road accident on New Year's Day 1978, leaving her half a million dollars.

Late one night in April 1979, Jean was murdered. Her body was found in a car parked on the underpass on the Klang-Subang Airport road, not far from where her husband had been killed. Jean had been stabbed to death. She had been attacked from behind. Police found her slumped in the blood-soaked front passenger's seat. Her safety belt was still fastened, her body tilted towards the left door; her hair was crumpled. Did the assassin grab her hair with one hand while trying to slit her throat with a knife or dagger held in the other? Her right palm was over her left palm on her lap. One of the stabs had been so powerful that the weapon plunged through her breast right to the spinal cord.

Jean's brother-in-law, S. Karthigesu, wearing white trousers and white shoes was found lying, either unconscious or pretending to be, on the road at the rear of the car. He told the police that when he got out of the car

For Review only

to urinate, he had been attacked by four men. He said they forced him to watch Jean being stabbed to death.

Then they felled him with a blow to the head. Not a drop of blood was found on Karthigesu's white trousers or white shoes. He was taken to the hospital. Two doctors failed to find any sign of a head injury. Karthigesu's dentures had fallen out of his mouth. They were found on the road by a policeman. One of the doctors said he could not find even a scratch on Karthigesu. A postmortem revealed that Jean was intoxicated at the time of her death.

No one witnessed the murder. The weapon was never found. Karthigesu was the last person to see Jean alive. In due course, after investigations, the police arrested 37-year-old Karthigesu and charged him with murdering Jean. At the trial, the Deputy Public Prosecutor (DPP), Mr T.D. Sambanthamurthi, said the murder of Jean Sinnappa was a crime of passion triggered by intense jealousy (chiefly due to her intimate association with a Sri Lankan doctor), and greed to get her wealth. The doctor and Jean exchanged lurid love letters, and the Prosecution said that Karthigesu's discovery of these love letters in Jean's handbag sent him raving mad with jealousy. Karthigesu denied he had seen the letters before Jean's murder. The Prosecution described Karthigesu's account of four men stabbing Jean, 'a highly improbable story'. The DPP said that Karthigesu had found out that Jean had stayed with her doctor lover at the Apollo Hotel. Karthigesu's love for Jean had turned to hatred. He decided to kill her. But why in April 1979?

The DPP said Karthigesu was obsessed by the thought that Jean was going to meet Dr Narada Warnasurya in Sri Lanka or in Singapore. "By this time Karthigesu was already raving mad, but, being a psychologist he continued to pretend being good to Jean. He continued to allow Jean to live with him in Klang, and because he loved Jean's three children, he had to close one eye over the matter."

The DPP said that the case against Karthigesu, a lecturer in psychology at a specialist teacher's training institute in Cheras, was entirely circumstantial. He would adduce evidence to show that the killing was brutal and premeditated and that Karthigesu was the last person seen in her company.

According to the DPP, Karthigesu washed himself at a pond nearby after killing Jean. Then the accused went back to the road and waited for passing vehicles. As soon as he saw one he lay down on the ground hoping to be seen and taken to the hospital 'where he could pull a yarn'. Did anyone see Karthigesu at the pond? No, but the DPP said this theory, or deduction, could be supported in the evidence by police dog handler Corporal K. Ramakrishnan, who told the court that his dog Keris traced the scent to the pool and back to the road. Added the DPP: "That Karthigesu had lain down on the ground each time he saw a vehicle, was supported in the evidence of witnesses who said they saw his stomach heaving up and down." Counsel said this would not have happened if he had been knocked unconscious, as Karthigesu claimed he was.

For Review only

A bundle of letters, mostly love letters between Jean and her Sri Lankan lover, aroused a great deal of interest. The DPP urged the jury to read a particular portion of a letter he had marked, which the senior investigating officer did not want to read in open court as he found it obscene.

The judge advised the jury to read all the letters.

Counsel for the Defence, Mr Ponnudurai, read out parts of an anonymous letter found among Jean's possessions. It accused Jean of carrying on a 'malicious and vindictive love game' with her Sri Lankan lover. The letter read: "You showered him with gifts, shirts, etc. You took him out to the cinema, Lake Gardens, Templer Park etc. You visited him in his room against his wish. You led him on and gave yourself freely to him ... " The letter addressed Jean as 'Our dear Miss Jean,' and it began: "We are very close and good friends of Dr Narada, a victim of your malicious and vindictive love game. He was a very happy man when he arrived here, but he was fated to meet the devil, you."

The letter was signed 'Men of Fair Play and Justice'. It ended: "Now a friendly warning. Dr Narada will not take you. He is happy with his family. So don't make a play for him again. He has had enough both in the form of pleasure and pain. Pleasure is what he got from you in his room, and pain is for trusting you. We will not let you rest in peace. We will meet your brother-in-law and tell him all we know. We will be only happy when we see you fall and be disgraced."

Few murders are ever witnessed. Often the murder weapon is never found. Sometimes the motive is unclear.

Other times, the victim's body is missing. A murderer in Britain dissolved the bodies of the persons he murdered in a bath full of acid. Then he pulled out the plug and the bodies vanished down the drain. He was convicted on circumstantial evidence.

In Singapore, Sunny Ang murdered his lover so as to collect the insurance money. Ang insured Jenny, a cabaret girl, for nearly a million dollars. Then he took her scuba-diving in dangerous waters. Nobody saw her murdered. Sunny Ang knew Jenny would never surface.

Ang was in a boat with the boatman. He never got his feet wet. He knew that Jenny's body would be swept out to sea.

Judge Buttrose, presiding at Ang's trial, explained to the jury the meaning of circumstantial evidence. "If," he said, "you take a novice scuba-diver to waters you know to be inherently dangerous with the intention that this scuba-diver shall dive into those waters, and you intend that by so doing she will never come up again, that she would be killed; if that is your intention, that this novice diver should go down into those waters and you intend she should be killed then that is equally murder as if you had accompanied that novice diver down to the bottom of the seabed and strangled her with your own hands."

Judge Buttrose said the jury had to remember that it was the cumulative effect of all the evidence that was important, not one isolated link in the chain of circumstantial evidence ... one had to consider circumstantial evidence in its totality. The cumulative

For Review only

effect of every one of those links had to be considered together, not individually.

There were sixteen links in the chain of circumstantial evidence which sent Sunny Ang to the gallows. The Prosecution in the case of the murder of Jean, the Malaysian beauty queen, did not list the links in the chain of evidence which caused the jury to find Karthigesu Guilty of Murder.

On appeal, it was discovered that one of the links was perjured evidence. Other evidence, the Appeal Judges said, should not have been presented. Accordingly, the appeal was allowed. S. Karthigesu was set free. The man who gave perjured evidence at the trial was sentenced by another judge to 10 years' jail.

A DEFINITION OF MURDER BY JUSTICE AZMI

“You must not speculate or guess at any conclusion which is not supported by evidence,” Judge Azmi told the jury. He reminded the all male jury of seven of their oaths to give a true, just and honest verdict. They should also not allow anything other than the evidence adduced in court to influence them in any way.

In his summing up, which took one hour and 45 minutes, Justice Azmi said: “You are the sole judges of facts. This means that you have to form your own opinions based on the evidence. In the course of my summing up I am entitled to express my views on the facts and to comment on the witnesses, but you need not follow me if you disagree with me—these being questions of fact. But I am the sole judge of law and you must accept my direction to you on questions of law.”

Justice Azmi said Karthigesu was not obliged to prove his innocence. It was the duty of the Prosecution to prove its case beyond reasonable doubt.

The jury, he said, had to start on the assumption that Karthigesu was innocent and then consider the evidence produced by the Prosecution. The Prosecution had to

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex Josey (1910–1986) was a British journalist, political writer and commentator, and biographer, best known for his biographies on Singapore's former Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew. He wrote over twenty political novels and many political articles on Singapore and Malaysia for various Singapore and international newspapers and journals. He was the first foreign correspondent to be kicked out of Singapore (then part of Malaysia) by the Malaysian government in July 1965, but returned to Singapore after its independence from Malaysia and became Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's Press Secretary for ten years. He died in 1986 in Singapore, aged 76.