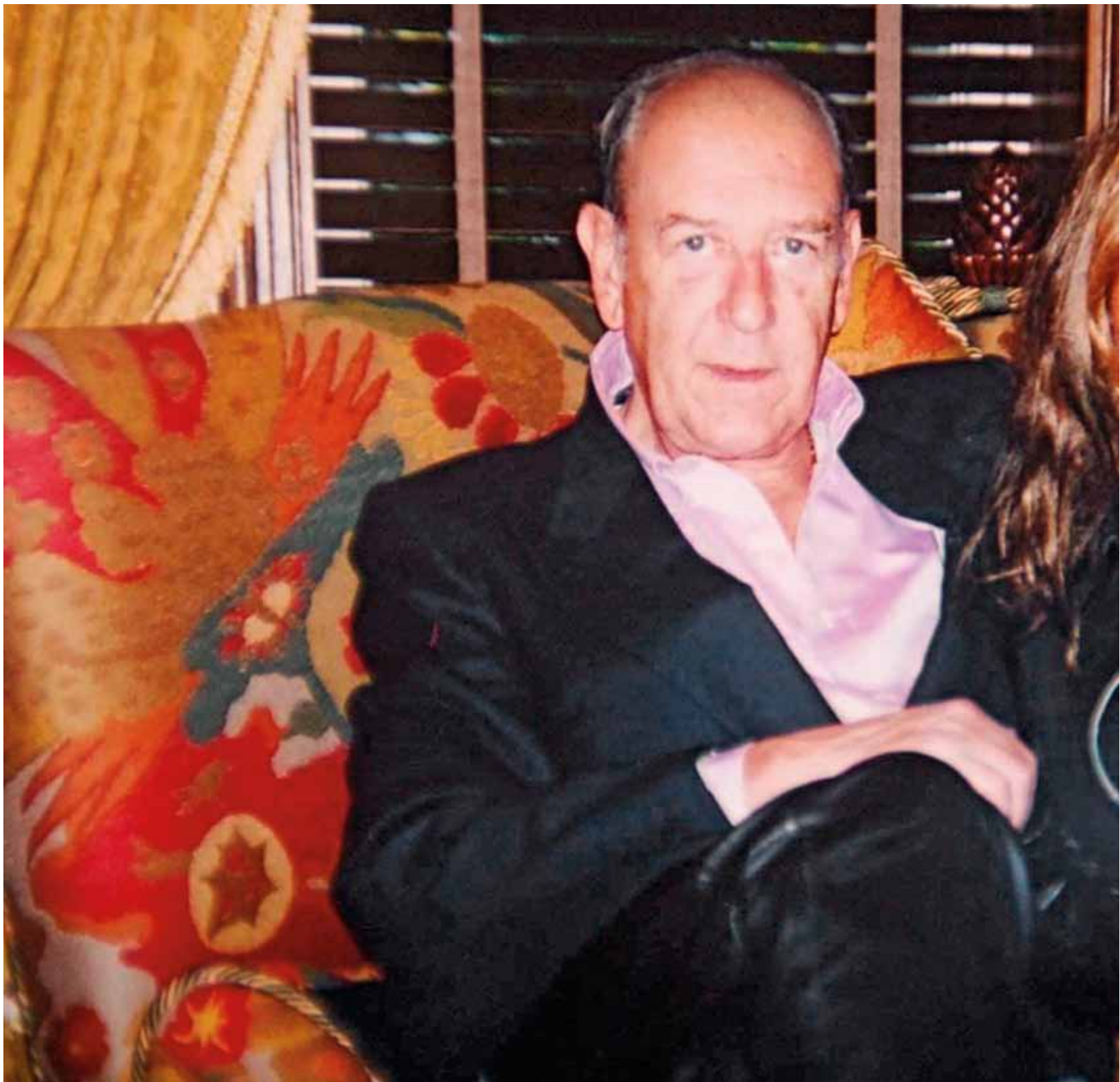




A BRUTAL NIGHT

Jamila M'Barek, Countess of Shaftesbury, was jailed for the sensational murder what happened on the night of her husband's death — until now. As the French



The 2004 murder on the French Riviera of the 10th Earl of Shaftesbury had all the trappings of a thriller: glamour, vice and aristocracy. The truncated version of events is that Lord Shaftesbury, a charming, middle-aged English peer with a weakness for alcohol — and for racy, exotic Mediterranean women — married Jamila M'Barek, an escort girl living on the French Riviera. Their marriage proved to be short-lived; when his Lordship initiated divorce proceedings, Jamila paid her brother Mohammed to kill Shaftesbury, before the aristocrat could disinherit his wife.

On the day of his death, the earl, who had been drinking heavily, arrived at Jamila's Cannes villa where a row broke out involving Shaftesbury, Jamila and her brother. Later, Mohammed would tell a French investigating magistrate: "It was an accident. My sister has nothing to do with it. He was aggressive. I had just woken up. I was in my underpants. He grabbed my throat. I got him on to his back. When I let go of his throat it was too late."

At their trial, Mohammed and Jamila were convicted of murder and sentenced to 25 years. Since the trial, neither has spoken about their part in the crime.

All along, the killing of Shaftesbury looked like a premeditated murder. Jamila was painted as a gold-digging foreign she-devil, who snuffed out the life of her titled English husband when it appeared that the money tap from which she was drinking was about to be turned off. In court, her testimony was confusing, offering no straightforward account of the events leading to the murder. ➤➤➤

ON THE RIVIERA

in France of her British husband, the 10th Earl. She has never spoken about authorities consider releasing her early, **David Malone** talks to her in jail

Referring to her French-North African roots, she said: "Deep down we are simple people. He [Shaftesbury] frequently called me a gypsy. What happened was a curse." Aside from Jamila's colourful pronouncements at her trial, she has never properly explained her role in these unsettling events, refusing all interview requests.

I wanted to know — eight years after the murder — whether time had allowed her to come to terms with the enormity of her crime, or whether she assigned the blame elsewhere. Perhaps on the legal system that now has her incarcerated in a high-security prison in the Loire region of central France. So several months ago, I wrote to her.

Three weeks later, an envelope landed on my in-tray. It was an open response to my overture. Over the months we exchanged letters, her handwriting was neat and florid, the letters peppered with exaggerated child-like drawings.

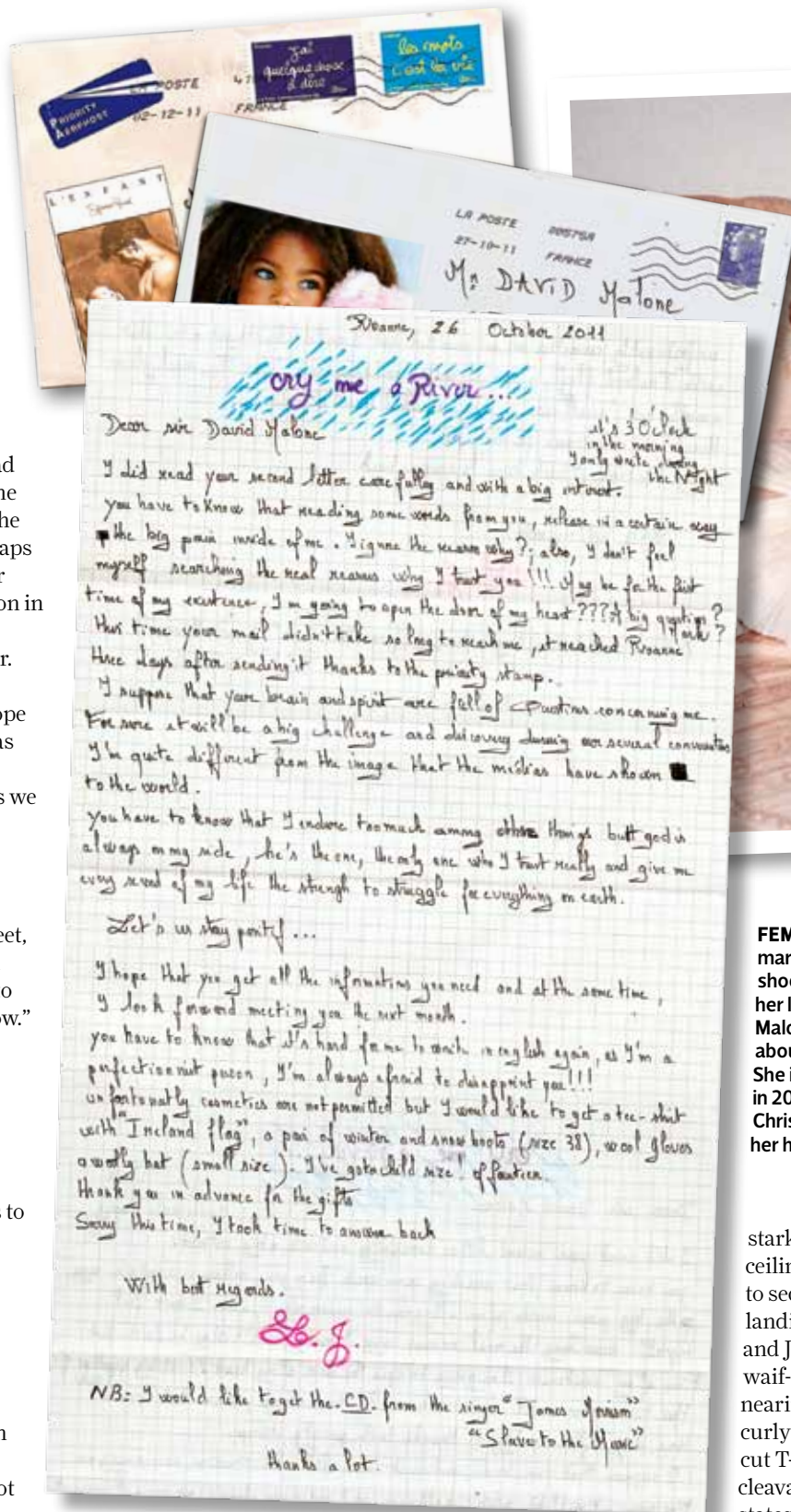
In the first letter she agrees to meet, stating: "Today, psychologically, I'm ready and strong enough mentally to reveal every piece of my life until now." The letter was signed Lady J. Shaftesbury, a title she stills holds, despite her conviction. A call to Debrett's Peerage and Baronetage confirmed that, as the wife of a peer at the time of his death, a widow may continue if she wishes to use her full title — in Jamila's case The Right Honourable, Jamila, Countess of Shaftesbury, Baroness Ashley of Wimborne St Giles, Baroness Cooper of Pawlett.

It was time to go to France.

The Centre de Détention de Roanne is a recently opened modern prison on the outskirts of Roanne, a two-hour drive from Lyon. While not on a main arterial route, Roanne is a popular stopover for British motorists heading south, attracted perhaps by La Maison Troigros, a restaurant with three Michelin stars.

The prison is five minutes' drive away and houses more than 600 inmates including 90 women prisoners. Visitors are treated with sensitivity; staff at the family reception area

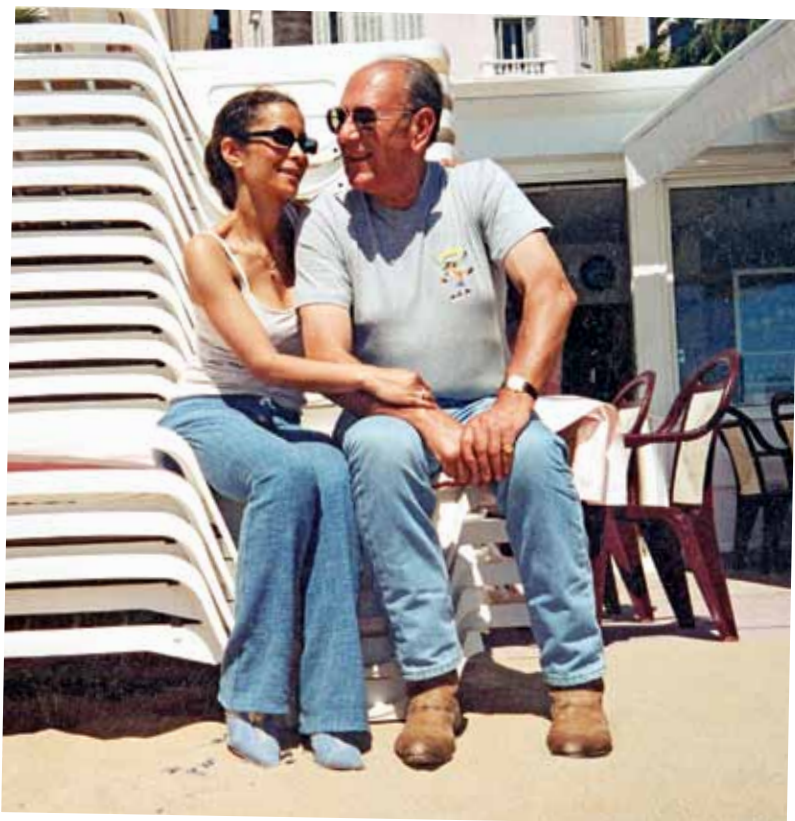
politely assist first-timers with the paperwork, recommending nearby hotels that discreetly offer discounts to families of inmates. Security is predictably tight: the journey from prison gates to the individual meeting rooms takes about 30 minutes, yet is barely the length of a football pitch. Each visitor is ushered into a



FEMME FATALE Jamila M'Barek's marriage to the Earl of Shaftesbury shocked and appalled his family. In her letters to journalist David Malone (left), she writes at 3am about trying to stay 'positif'. She is seen above in happier times in 2003 in London and Cannes at Christmas (above right) and with her husband in Tunisia in 2002

stark room. A microphone on the ceiling relays the conversation to security officers on the landing. A second door opens and Jamila M'Barek enters. A waif-like, desperately thin woman nearing 50, sporting dyed-blond curly hair sits down, her low-cut T-shirt revealing an ample cleavage. Jamila nervously states her position.

"Seven years ago, when I was sent to prison, I hated the world," she begins. "I refused to read newspapers, watch TV or listen to music. But now in 2012, having served my time as a model prisoner, I hope to receive parole before the year ends." Her English is better than my French, so we continue chiefly in English. "Why," I ask, "did you agree to this



In the afternoons Jamila studies. She claims that a prison volunteer, a woman married to a pastor, has given her religious instruction which has not only helped with the loneliness of imprisonment but has also forced her to confront the enormity of her crime. At the trial, her brother confessed to strangling the peer

Raf Schouten, by whom she had a son and a daughter. The marriage ended in divorce. In 1993 Jamila posed naked for Playboy and around this time began working for an upmarket escort agency that provided company for wealthy clients, often well-heeled foreigners including, it was said, a number of celebrities. So it is not surprising that she did, eventually, meet her ideal man.

Today both Jamila and her sister deny that she ever worked a prostitute, albeit an upmarket one, but the evidence that she did is overwhelming. For a young exotic beauty, there were rich pickings to be found on the Côte d'Azur and Jamila took full advantage of what lay before her.

but she was deemed by the jury to be complicit. In all our conversations, she accepts her share of responsibility. “My faith helps me, it gives me the strength to continue,” she whispers, adding: “God has forgiven me for the things I did. He knows who I am.”

The journey to becoming the Countess of Shaftesbury was certainly a remarkable one for Jamila. Born in Lens, northern France, she is one of eight children — the eldest died of injuries received at just seven months. Jamila

However from an early age, Jamila showed signs that her destiny was to be far from the slums of Tunis. “Jamila is very intelligent, always was,” declared her sister. “She was always in the top two in her class and at the end of the school year received a prize, without fail. She was our role model. We always wanted to be like Jamila.”

In her late teens, Jamila moved to St Tropez on the French Riviera where she met and married a wealthy Dutch businessman.

In Roanne prison, I press her on how she first met the peer, who preferred to use his name Anthony Ashley-Cooper rather than his title. She skirts the issue and states that at the time she was a wealthy, independent woman, with properties in Cannes and Tunisia, two cars, beautiful clothes, but with a single character flaw. She was, she declares, *une femme enfant*, an immature woman drawn to older men. “I was at home in Cannes with the kids when the agency called saying I had a client in Paris who wanted to meet that same evening.” She paces around the room as ►►►→



There, he proved that he was strong enough to have acted alone, though clearly further proof was needed; he succeeded in lifting a 13-stone mannequin — the same weight as the late peer at the time of his death — from a car boot and then tossed it down a ravine. The trial in May 2007 of Jamila and her brother Mohammed in Nice was widely reported in Britain and France. Forensic evidence indicated that Shaftesbury had been strangled during an

somewhat beneath this titled lady. From the trial — and later in my meetings with her — it was difficult to unravel the real Jamila. The Shaftesbury family, however, is in no doubt of her guilt.

Now, having had time to reflect upon these terrible events, Jamila blames her demeanour in part for the severity of her sentence. “In court they said I killed him for his money. That is not true. I was at the time a very wealthy lady.”

‘MY FAITH HELPS ME AND GIVES ME STRENGTH. GOD HAS FORGIVEN ME FOR THE THINGS I DID’

apparent row between Shaftesbury and Mohammed, after which Jamila assisted in the disposal of the body.

The trial saw the perfectly coiffured widow pouting toward the jury. She played with her hair in the manner of a young girl as she gave evidence, dipping her head to one side as she told of her passion for “*le Comte de Shaftesbury*”, though her insistence of conjugal devotion often trailed off into a mumbled “etcetera, etcetera”. She spoke rather languidly, as if the whole judicial process was a bore, a tedium

She continues: “My previous husband was a millionaire: why did I not kill him as well?”

In Roanne prison she points a finger at her accusers. “They said I was a poor Arabic woman, they damaged my family, my honour. I have never granted an interview until now, and this is why.” While in no way denying that she was present at the killing, she says that she was simply “not herself”, taking tranquillisers and drinking heavily to help her cope with Shaftesbury’s increasingly erratic behaviour. By this stage the marriage was in trouble; he

had started a new relationship with a young mother, a club hostess from Cannes.

Jamila claims that her brother strangled Shaftesbury in her Cannes flat in November 2004. “I didn’t want to watch the fight,” she says. “There was blood on the floor. I did not know if it was my brother or my husband’s blood. My brother couldn’t believe my husband was dead.”

The primary victims in this sorry affair are without doubt the Shaftesbury family. The 10th Earl was certainly a notorious womaniser, an alcoholic, a lonely man with more money than good judgement. Yet in every sense he was a giver, an award-winning conservationist whose many achievements included the planting of more than a million trees.

The 12th Earl, Nick Ashley-Cooper, Anthony’s son, told *The Sunday Times Magazine* last year that the family had heard nothing from either of the M’Bareks. Jamila herself has never expressed any remorse. “Part of her defence was that she really loved my father, yet there’s never been any sign of remorse from her. It’s always been fair proof for me that she’s not really genuine in what she says.”

He said he did not often think about the events of 2004. “They were put away. We know justice was done. And for ever more the records will show that these two were guilty of killing my father. How much time they serve doesn’t matter to me at all.”

With good behaviour — by her own account Jamila has been a model prisoner — the Countess of Shaftesbury could be freed before the end of this year. On appeal, her 25-year sentence was reduced to 20 years. With full remission and a recognition of her exemplary behaviour behind bars, her time served could well be under 10 years. She claims to be haunted by the events of eight years ago and, like so many convicted criminals, wishes she could put the clock back.

But in her account of the events there is still some inconsistency — perhaps she is confused or even trying to be confused about what really happened. “I still love him,” she whispers. “For me it was a crime of passion. I never wanted his death.” And then there is a knock on the cell door. Our time is up.

As I drive back through the Burgundy sunshine, I ponder her words — had the whole episode been entirely premeditated? Was she telling the truth, or had I, perhaps like the peer himself, been spun a line by a plausible yet deadly apologist? ■