

IN THE SUPREME COURT OF JUDICATURE OF JAMAICA

IN COMMON LAW

SUIT NO. C.L. V013 OF 1984

BETWEEN

LINETTE VASSELL
CYRIL VASSELL

FIRST PLAINTIFF
SECOND PLAINTIFF

AND

THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

DEFENDANT

Mr. Richard Small and Mr. A. Rattray instructed by Rattray, Patterson and Rattray for Plaintiffs.

Mr. Lennox Campbell, Mr. Evan Oniss and Mr. Audley Foster for Defendants.

HEARD: 25TH, 26TH, 27TH, 28TH, OCTOBER, 1993, 2ND, 3RD, NOVEMBER, 1993, 13TH, 14TH, 15TH DECEMBER, 1993 AND 19TH JANUARY, 1996.

JAMES GRANVILLE J.

In this action the Plaintiffs are claiming damages for trespass to property. The first Plaintiff also claims to recover damages for false imprisonment and malicious prosecution. Originally there were three Defendants but a Notice of Discontinuance was filed in respect of the Second and Third Defendants so that the sole Defendant is now the Attorney General.

At the close of the Plaintiff's case the Defence represented by Mr. Evan Oniss informed the Court that the Defence conceded on the question of liability. Judgment was accordingly entered in the Plaintiffs' favour. The parties were unable to arrive at a mutually acceptable figure in respect of damages and so it remains for damages to be assessed by the Court.

The background to this action is that in December, 1983 there was a bank robbery in St. Mary and one McDonald was arrested in connection with the robbery. A car allegedly used by McDonald in the robbery was owned by the First Plaintiff (hereafter referred to as Mrs. Vassell). McDonald was a supporter or member of the Workers' Party of Jamaica, Mrs. Vassell was also a member of that party. The party had a system whereby vehicles belonging to members were made available for party work. According to Mrs. Vassell it was those circumstances that she made her car available, she was totally unaware that McDonald was involved in any criminal activity or that her car was likely to be used in such activity.

On 16th December, 1983 while she was at her place of work the police went there and questioned Mrs. Vassell about the car and she told them of the

circumstances in which she had loaned the car to McDonald. Mrs. Vassell said in evidence that the behaviour of the police became hostile and she sought to exercise her right to have her attorney-at-law present before she answered further questions. This right was denied by the police and, indeed, she was ridiculed for seeking to exercise such a right.

Mrs. Vassell was taken to her home by the police, a number of other policemen were already there when she arrived. The house was searched in the presence of her helper, her five year old daughter, an ailing and elderly mother-in-law and a cousin. Mrs. Vassell's husband (second plaintiff) arrived while the search was being conducted. A small quantity of ganja was found in a closet and the Second Plaintiff (hereafter referred to as Mr. Vassell) admitted that it belonged to him.

Mr. and Mrs. Vassell were taken to the Central Police Station, Mr. Vassell granted bail but Mrs. Vassell was kept in custody, she was placed in the lock-up. On the following day Mrs. Vassell was questioned by Superintendent Richards. She gave a statement to the police and was released on bail in respect of the charge for possession of ganja.

On 20th December 1983 a group of policemen led by Superintendent Richards invaded the Plaintiffs' home at about 6.15 a.m. It appeared to Mrs. Vassell that they scaled a fence to enter the premises. Mrs. Vassell was taken once more to the Central Police Station where she was again placed in the lock-up. Superintendent Richards had informed Mrs. Vassell that he wanted to ask her certain questions at the station. Such questions were never asked neither did Mrs. Vassell see Superintendent Richards at the station despite efforts by her attorneys to contact the Superintendent.

Mrs. Vassell's attorney prepared and served the necessary papers to ground a Habeas Corpus application; that was on 22nd December, 1983. The matter was set for hearing on 23rd December, 1983. On that morning (23.12.83) shortly before Mrs. Vassell was due to go to Court she was charged with a series of offences. The habeas corpus proceedings were frustrated.

On 29th December, 1983 Mrs. Vassell was taken to the Resident Magistrates Court in Port Maria, that was in connection with charges related to the bank robbery. An application was made for bail but this was strongly opposed by Superintendent Richards. The accused was remanded in custody until 5th January, 1984. On that

date (5.1.84) Mrs. Vassell was granted bail. The case was then listed for mention on 12th January 1984 and a Preliminary Enquiry was due to begin on 21st February 1984.

In Mrs. Vassell's own words, "On 21st February 1984 I went back for the Preliminary Enquiry and the Prosecution offered no evidence against me, the Information was dismissed, the Resident Magistrate told me I was free to go".

The evidence in this case clearly shows that Mrs. Vassell was embarrassed and humiliated as a result of harrassment by the police. The harrassment began on 16th December, 1983 when she was taken from her office by the police, it continued when her house was searched and the embarrassment and humiliation climaxed in her incarceration at the Central Police Station lock-up.

On the question of damages, two amendments were granted in the Statement of Claim.

(i) the deletion from the Particulars of Special Damage item (B) the sum of \$16000 and to replace therefor the sum of \$18000; and

(ii) the addition of a paragraph II claiming Exemplary Damages.

Mrs. Vassell's reputation was damaged both at her workplace and in her home environment. She suffered the humiliating and degrading experience of incarceration in the lock-up for a prolonged period including the Christmas holidays. The evidence discloses that the conduct of the police was arbitrary, oppressive and unconstitutional.

Mr. Small addressed the Court at length on the question of quantum of Damages. He brought to the attention of the Court the publication Civil Actions against the police by Richard Clayton and Hugh Tomlinson (Sweet & Maxwell 1981). The Court was referred in particular to page 357 paragraphs (2)(a) and (b) where it is suggested that the best approach in determining the quantum of damages for false imprisonment is to consider an hourly rate. The hourly rate suggested is £300 (Pounds) in 1986. This sum might be considered unrealistic in Jamaica.

Numerous cases were cited in an effort to assist the Court in arriving at the appropriate quantum of damages.

These include:-

(i) Carrington and Another v Karamath 38 W.I.R. 306.

(ii) Cassell & Company Ltd. v. Broome [1972] 1 All E.R.

(iii) Peter Flemming v Detective Corporal Myers and the Attorney General
Suit No. S.C.C.A. No. 63/85

Judgment delivered December 18, 1989.

In this latter case the Plaintiff/Appellant was arrested and taken to Bull Bay Police Station but was discharged on a charge of murder at the end of a Preliminary Enquiry. There was imprisonment for thirteen days before the accused was brought before the Court - Award \$3000.

The Court (Coram Carey P. Ag., Forte and Morgan JJA) was of the view that the matter was deserving of punitive damages but such damages were not claimed.

In his address on the quantum of damages Mr. Oniss was quite frank, he conceded that the period of incarceration before Mrs. Vassell was taken to Court could be regarded as a breach of her Constitutional rights. Mr. Oniss cited a number of authorities. There were two instances of imprisonment of Mrs. Vassell thereby aggravating the matter.

I have considered the arguments on both sides and all the authorities cited including the case of Colin S. Henry v. The Attorney General of Jamaica, Assistant Superintendent T.K. Whyte and Detective Constable Lmond Brown decided by Panton J. on 17th May, 1993.

I have examined some recent awards for Malicious Prosecution and False Imprisonment - a pattern emerges. Each case must be considered on its own facts.

In the result I make the following awards:-

- | | | |
|---|------------|---------------------------------|
| (i) Damages
for Trespass awarded to both
Plaintiffs | \$10000 to | |
| (ii) General Damages for
False Imprisonment and
Malicious Prosecution | \$600000 | } Awarded to First
Plaintiff |
| Exemplary Damages | \$300000 | |
| (iii) Special Damages | \$20210 | |

Costs to the Plaintiffs to be agreed or taxed.

Interest on \$910,000 @ 5% per annum with effect from 30th May, 1984.

Interest on \$20210 @ 5% with effect from 16th December, 1983.