

Oakes Murder (Continued)

when news of Sir Harry's murder reached de Marigny that morning, the count had remarked, "It's about time somebody killed the old—"

The Miami men decided that, in setting fire to Sir Harry's bed, the murderer himself almost certainly suffered slight burns. Harold Christie had already been examined with this in mind and given a clean bill. Questioning de Marigny and being told that, during the murder period (between 2:30 and 5 a.m.) the count had been asleep in his cottage five miles from Westbourne, the American detectives examined him and found the hair singed on his hands, arms, and the VanDyke beard he affected.

De Marigny claimed that his hair might have been seared when he burned the feathers off some chickens a week before. In the face of this explanation, the count's lack of an alibi, and one of his fingerprints allegedly lifted off the Chinese screen the day after the murder with some transparent tape, the Nassau police arrested de Marigny.

Convinced that her husband was innocent, Nancy Oakes de Marigny engaged Raymond C. Schindler, the famous American private detective, to help free de Marigny. Schindler took the case and soon satisfied himself that the count was guiltless.

He dug up an alibi for de Marigny. It was provided by the count's friend, the Marquis de Visdelou-Guimbeau, who had spent most of the murder night in de Marigny's company, and that of two Bahamian ladies, under circumstances a gentleman was loath to discuss. Schindler felt that the scant half-hour the marquis could not account for his friend's movements was far too little to have allowed de Marigny to drive the five miles to Westbourne, commit the complicated crime, and return.

The fingerprint on the Chinese screen could have been deposited there, de Marigny explained to Schindler, while he wandered about Westbourne before his arrest, waiting to be questioned. It was de Marigny's opinion, however, that his print had been deliberately faked by authorities.

Astonishingly, this theory was confirmed by Schindler and two of America's outstanding fingerprint experts called in for the defense. They concluded by comparing the Crown's photograph of the Chinese screen-de Marigny fingerprint with photographs they themselves took of the screen, that the backgrounds were quite different; their pictures of the screen showed a smooth surface, whereas the Crown's picture placed the print against a background of circles, as from a water glass.

THE POLICE had never advanced even a theory as to precisely what kind of bludgeon had caused the queer triangle-shaped wounds on the dead man's head. Schindler prowled about the tool shed of a more modest house Oakes owned in Nassau, procured an inventory of the tools kept there, and discovered that one was missing—a prospector's pick. A prospector's pick has a triangular point. Just such a weapon could have inflicted the wounds. But with it gone, Schindler could prove nothing.

Dogged by hostile police tailing him, Ray Schindler turned up more and more leads to the possible murderer of Sir Harry Oakes. None of these had apparently been followed up by the local authorities. Harold Christie, presumably the last person besides the murderer to have seen Sir Harry alive and the only known occupant of the mansion on the night of the crime, had been dropped as a suspect as soon as he passed the hair-singeing test.

Schindler's office turned up some interesting information about Christie's background in the States, before he settled in Nassau. A man named Phillips,



The Duke and Duchess of Windsor figured in the case because he was Governor of the Bahamas at the time.

an ex-investigator for the U.S. Treasury Department, claimed that Christie had run rum in the early '20s, had had Capone mob connections, and had been in trouble with Federal authorities in Boston. An examination of the Federal records there revealed that the index number relating to Christie's "trouble" had disappeared from the files. The missing number led to a document alleging an infraction by Christie of a Federal statute, and included a "body attachment," a sort of warrant, which had never been served.

A photostat of the warrant bearing Christie's name was mailed from New York to Ray Schindler in Nassau, just before de Marigny's trial. With Harold Christie an all-important witness for the Crown, the defense felt that the placement of this document in evidence might tend to discredit his character and, therefore, his testimony.

But the envelope containing the document did not reach Schindler in time for the trial. It never reached him. To this day, the mystery of its failure to be delivered has never been explained.

COUNT DE MARIGNY was acquitted, and there the case has rested. Although Nancy subsequently divorced him and remarried, she recently told London reporters that she has "information of value" and is eager to testify if the case is reopened. Witnesses now scattered in a dozen countries have agreed to return to Nassau if officially asked. De Marigny himself, now living in Cuba, has stated in a biography that Oakes was shot, not beaten to death, and charged the Bahamian authorities with ignoring "inconsistencies" in the Crown testimony.

In 1950 a woman reporter and lawyer from Washington, D.C., Betty Renner, was found dead at the bottom of a Bahamian well. Her friends said that she had been warned to stop asking questions about the Oakes case. A routine inquiry expired quietly.

Informed opinion in Nassau holds that Oakes' killing was engineered by a trusted associate whom Sir Harry discovered dabbling in something illegal he could not or would not stomach. Sir Harry is supposed to have been collecting evidence in secret against this person. This person found it out and hired a powerful islander to commit the murder and make it look like native voodoo revenge.

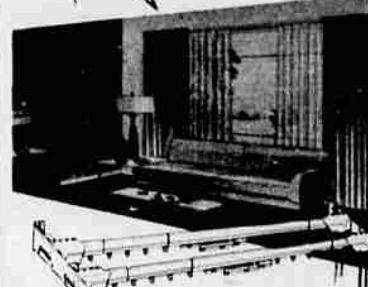
This writer himself, many years ago, had pointed out to him a Bahamian woman, gatekeeper of an estate on a remote cay of New Providence Island, who allegedly was the widow of the accomplice; she had been given the gatekeeping sinecure, he was told, to keep her mouth shut.

Is the Bahamian government afraid of this alleged mastermind? Or is he too important or dangerous to touch without an airtight case? Into what lofty realms does the Oakes case reach?

Many people think they can answer all these questions.

But the Bahamas House of Assembly has recessed without seeing Cyril Stevenson's resolution implemented. Sixteen years after Sir Harry Oakes' grisly murder, inaction, frustration, and shadowy mystery continue to characterize the case.

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