

SIMPSON, KEITH FORTY YEARS OF MURDER
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY
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CHAPTER 13

THE VIOLENT DEATH OF
KING ANANDA OF SIAM

In June 1946 my breakfast *Times* in London carried a succinct despatch from the Associated Press in Bangkok:

9th June—The young king of Siam, Ananda Mahidol, was found dead in a bedroom at the Barompiman Palace today with a bullet wound in his head. The discovery was made by a servant shortly before noon. The Chief of Police and the Directors of the Chulalongkorn Hospital, who were called immediately to the palace, said afterwards that death was accidental. Great crowds have gathered in silent grief outside the palace. Most of them were unaware of the death of the King until news was broadcast by the Government radio at seven o'clock.

Of course, I had no idea then that I was to be caught up in all this, or that the statement that death was accidental was an official 'cover'. Whatever else the Chief of Police and the doctors put out for official consumption, they must already have been aware that it was a case of murder.

The Kings of Siam, the Chakri dynasty, who had ruled the country for seven centuries, were not ordinary mortals. The King was the 'Lord of Life', 'Divine'. None of his subjects was allowed to touch him physically, to turn his back on the royal presence, or even to cross his legs when permitted to sit in the Royal Palace. To kill him was not only regicide but deicide.

For all that, it was by no means a rare event in that country.

Of thirty-three Kings, no fewer than one-third were either murdered or murdered their rivals. State officials near the throne had killed their rulers, and there had also been other murders in the Royal Family. Being a living god was no safeguard against a violent death.

King Ananda VII, the latest to end his reign in this sad tradition, had come to the throne in 1935, at the age of ten, and survived the

Japanese occupation in the Second World War. On 8th June, a Saturday in the Year of the Dog 2489, Buddhist era (AD 1946), he was slightly indisposed, suffering from a mild intestinal upset. At 10 p.m. he retired to his private suite, dressed for bed in a light T shirt and blue Chinese silk trousers. He was protected while he slept by a guard of four men and the Inspector of the Watch. At 6 next morning he was visited by his mother, who woke him up and found him perfectly well. At 7.30 a.m. his trusted page, Butr, came on duty and began preparing a breakfast table on a balcony adjoining the King's dressing room. The night guard went off duty, and the day staff assembled.

At 8.30 a.m. Butr saw the King standing in his dressing room. The page took in the usual glass of orange juice, a few minutes later, but by then the King had gone back to bed. With a gesture he refused the juice and dismissed Butr, according to the page's own evidence.

At 8.45 the King's other trusted page, Nai Chit, appeared unexpectedly. The two pages were on alternating duty, but Nai Chit was not due to relieve Butr for another two hours. He said he had called to measure the King's medals and decorations on behalf of a jeweller who was making a case for them.

At 9 a.m. Prince Bhoomipol, Ananda's younger brother, called on the King to inquire about his health. He said afterwards that he had found the King dozing peacefully in his bed: a mosquito netting covered him over all.

Twenty minutes later a single shot rang out from the King's bedroom. Nai Chit ran in, and out, and along the corridor to the apartments of the King's mother. 'The King's shot himself!' he cried. The wording of this announcement was later to be used in evidence against him.

I was given a carefully worded description of the scene when, some time later, a Major-General of the Police of Siam came to my Department at Guy's to seek some help in interpreting what had happened. It was my first case out of England.

Ananda lay in bed within a mosquito netting, his body covered, but the arms lying outside the coverlet alongside the body. Close to his left hand was an American Army .45 Colt automatic pistol, and above the left eye was a single bullet wound.

There were no police photographs of the scene to support this account; for by the time the police appeared on the scene, everything had been irreparably 'tidied'.

One of the first to enter the bedroom was the King's mother, who threw herself, grief-stricken, on her son's body, weeping and moaning 'My dear Nand, my dear Nand!' The King's old nanny followed, and after feeling his pulse she picked up the pistol and put it on the bedside cabinet. Prince Bhoomipol, hearing the disturbance, came in, and then Butr, who put the pistol in a drawer 'for safety', thereby adding his fingerprints to Nanny's. Butr was sent to call a doctor. After he had come Prince Bhoomipal joined the Queen Mother, Nanny, and the two pages in washing the body, laying it out in clean linen, and applying blocks of ice and setting up a fan to cool it and delay decomposition, which the hot weather would otherwise have caused within a few hours.

Meanwhile various officials were arriving: the Chief of the Palace Guard, the Chief Major Domo and Protocol, the Secretary-General, and high-ranking Cabinet Ministers led by the premier, Pridi Banomyong, who had for long been an enigmatic figure in Siamese political life. As a young lawyer, together with a young artillery officer named Pibul Songram, Pridi had conspired to overthrow the monarchy in 1932. The revolution had quickly petered out, and Pridi had gone into exile. But he had returned and regained favour, along with his friend Pibul, who had risen to the rank of Field-Marshal by the time of the King's death.

Looking understandably agitated, Pridi paced up and down and said to the Secretary-General, in English, 'The King is a suicide'—a paraphrase of Nai Chit's announcement of the King's death.

At last the police arrived; in fact, it was the Chief of Police, who had to push through the confused mob of officials to reach the body, and he was not allowed to do anything useful even then. Following protocol ('No-one may touch the Divine Body') the King's uncle stopped him from examining either the wound or the King's hands. Nobody was allowed to feel if the body was stiff or cold. All the Chief of Police could do was ask for the pistol: and when it was produced he added his own prints to those of Nanny and Butr. He noted that the weapon was not on the safety catch and that only one round was missing. No bullet had been found, but Nai Chit produced a spent cartridge case which he said he had found on the floor on the left side of the body.

Before the King's body was embalmed for official burial in a ritual tomb, the doctors of the Chulalongkorn Hospital were allowed to examine it, and they found a second wound, smaller than the first, at

the back of the head. On the erroneous assumption that an exit wound is always larger and more ragged than an entry wound, they decided he had been shot through the back of the head. Rumours quickly ran round Bangkok. 'The King was assassinated'; and, more specifically, 'Pridi killed the King'. If not Pridi, one of his protégés. Two of these in particular were suspected. One was Lieutenant Vacharachai, known as Too, a former ADC to the King, who had recently been sacked. The other was Chaleo, a former personal secretary to the King.

Three days after the shooting Nai Chit showed the police a hole in the mattress behind the King's head, and a bullet was recovered.

Accident, suicide, or murder? A public Commission of Inquiry was set up to find out the truth. It was assisted by a medical sub-committee hopelessly overloaded—it consisted of fifteen doctors—general practitioners, surgeons, a psychiatrist, a toxicologist, an anatomist, and just one forensic pathologist, Dr S. G. Niyomsen, Lecturer in the subject to the University of Bangkok. The Commission began hearings on 26th June and was still in session in August, when a General Election was held. Pridi's party won; and, apparently feeling vindicated, Pridi resigned the Premiership. In October, the Commission of Inquiry reported that the King's death could not have been accidental but that neither suicide nor murder was satisfactorily proved.

In November 1947, after nearly eighteen months of rumours, intrigues, and secret struggles, tanks rumbled through Bangkok's ancient streets as the Army, under Marshal Pibul, staged a *coup d'état*. Pridi fled in a sampan. Vacharachai also disappeared. Former secretary Chaleo was arrested along with the pages Butr and Nai Chit. All three were charged with conspiracy to kill the King. A new Chief of Police, Major-General Phra Phinik Chankadi, was instructed to collect evidence for their trial. The Director-General of Public Prosecutions decided to seek an outside opinion on the medical evidence, and this was where I came in. On 13th May 1948, the Major-General came with an interpreter to see me in London.

The question was still the same: accident, suicide, or murder?

The King had been keenly interested in small firearms, and had often practised shooting with Vacharachai. He had kept an American Army .45 Colt automatic in his bedside drawer. Could it have gone off accidentally while he was examining it? Would an intelligent man who knew anything about firearms inspect a pistol with the safety

catch off and the magazine fully charged while lying in bed on his back, his head on the pillow and the pistol pointing at his forehead? The idea seemed wildly far-fetched, even apart from the fact that the King's sight was so defective that he could not have examined anything without his spectacles, and at the time of his death these were lying on the bedroom table.

The position of the body made suicide almost equally unlikely. In twenty years' experience I had not seen a suicide shoot himself whilst lying flat on his back. No such case existed, so far as I knew. The suicide sits up or stands up to shoot himself.

There were other strong indications against suicide. The pistol found at the King's side was by his left hand, but he was right-handed. The wound, over the left eye, was not in one of the elective sites, nor a 'contact' discharge. The direction of fire was not inward towards the centre of the head. Furthermore the King had never hinted at suicide to anyone and had not been depressed at the time of his death.

That left only murder, for which the evidence was very strong. I thought he had almost certainly been shot while dozing, and that unconsciousness had followed instantly. The muzzle of the pistol had evidently been close to but not against the skin, giving the King no warning or any chance to try to protect himself. 'This is not a case of suicidal discharge nor of accident, but one of deliberate killing by firearm,' I concluded my report.

The trial of Chaleo, Butr, and Nai Chit began three months later, in August 1948. The court consisted of four judges presided over by the Chief Justice. The prosecution's case was supported by 124 witnesses and such voluminous documentary evidence that the defence counsel asked for an adjournment to give them time to consider it. When this was refused the counsel resigned, and there was some delay before new counsel were found. The trial then proceeded at a leisurely pace. Bail was of course refused.

The prosecution alleged that the pistol found lying *outside* the mosquito netting by the King—and it was his own property—was not the weapon that had killed him. Butr was alleged to have planted it after the shooting, presumably in a clumsy attempt to make it look like suicide.

In January 1949 I was consulted again on the case, this time by Dr Niyomsen of the University of Bangkok, the pathologist on the first team of inquiry. He came to London and stayed nine days, providing me with first-hand additional facts, which strengthened the opinion I

had already given. Thus the situation of the bloodstains and the position of the bullet showed that the King's head had certainly been resting on the pillow when he was shot. In a further report I pointed out also that it would be easy to discover, with a comparison microscope, whether the bullet recovered from the bedding and cartridge case from the floor had been fired from the pistol found beside the body of the King. This had not been done.

Dr Niyomsen asked me if I would be willing to give evidence at the trial. I said I would, subject to Foreign Office approval, which was granted on the strength of an assurance by the Home Office that I did not hold any official Government appointment (I was 'consultant' to the Home Office). Dr Niyomsen said he thought I would be called to Bangkok in mid-April. However, in March, to everyone's surprise, Pridi and Vacharachai sailed up the Menam River from China and tried to seize power in Bangkok. They occupied the radio station, but Marshal Pibul's forces quickly routed the rebels, and Pridi and Vacharachai disappeared again. The trial was postponed after two of the defence counsel had been murdered, and Dr Niyomsen told me in a letter that the medical evidence was unlikely to be called until August or September. 'The trial is long and tedious,' he wrote. 'One witness may be questioned for a week and the whole case may last a year.' These were tendentious delaying tactics.

Niyomsen wrote again in September, when the accused had already been in custody nearly two years. 'The sitting takes place every alternate week, each lasting three full days.' The Director-General of the Science Department testified that the pistol found beside the King's body had not been fired for at least a week before the shooting. He also said his laboratory was not equipped with the necessary apparatus and materials for the matching test of the bullet and the spent cartridge case with the pistol which I had suggested. However, a police officer said that the bullet and the cartridge case definitely matched the pistol. Other prosecution 'experts' declared the bullet found in the bedding could not have gone through the King's head 'because it wasn't flattened as they thought it would have been by crashing through bone.' These experts continued with a lengthy consideration of the spasm of muscle that might have followed such a bullet wound if it had passed through a certain part of the brain; this had relevance as the King had been found dead as if in sleep, not contorted by spasm or gripping a weapon. And so it went on, interminably. 'I presume it will not be our turn until next year.'

wrote Niyomsen: he had oriental patience.

A few weeks later two of the defence counsel were arrested and charged with treason. Of the remaining two counsel one resigned, leaving only one young but redoubtable lawyer for the defence, Fat Nasingkhla. Towards the end of the case he was joined by Chaleo's daughter, who had just graduated.

At last the medical evidence was called, beginning with the fifteen doctors who had served on the sub-committee to the Commission of Inquiry set up after the King's death. One after another gave the opinion that the King had been murdered, but not without misgivings. 'Owing to some crisis in politics in this country, it is not sure that this trial will continue,' Niyomsen wrote to me. 'If a new Government is formed, the aspect of the trial may be changed; and we doctors who confirmed regicide do not know our fate yet. We are expecting a *coup d'état* any morning on waking up; besides, Communist invasion may come any time.' I was advised to unpack my travelling case 'for the present', and it seemed to me reasonable advice.

Siam was spared both a *coup d'état* and invasion, and the medical evidence was concluded, without my personal appearance, in January 1950. More circumstantial evidence followed, and it was again summer before the defence began. All three accused gave evidence denying any complicity in the affair. Nai Chit fared worst in the witness box, partly because of his odd reason for being at the palace at the time of the shooting and partly because of his announcement 'The King has shot himself'. The trial finally ended in May 1951, two years and nine months after it had begun. In a judgment of 50,000 words the court found that *King Ananda had been assassinated*, but that Chaleo had not been proved guilty and that neither of the pages could have fired the fatal shot. However, they found Nai Chit guilty of being a party to the crime. 'The charges against Chaleo and Butr are dismissed and the two accused are hereby ordered to be released.'

Nai Chit appealed against conviction, and the prosecution appealed against the acquittal of Chaleo and Butr. After yet another fifteen months of deliberation the Appeal Court, in a judgment lasting fourteen hours, dismissed Nai Chit's appeal and, undeterred by the common doctrine of *autrefois acquit*, found Butr guilty too.

Final appeals were made to the Supreme Court, the Dakka, which considered them for ten more months and then convicted Chaleo.

Four months later, when the three men had spent nearly six years in custody, Chaleo, Nai Chit, and Butr were executed.

I was sorry not to have been able to go to Bangkok, but I have a beautiful silver cigarette box with the Royal Palace engraved on it to remind me of the case. It was presented to me in London by Major-General Phra Phinik 'on behalf of the King'. The fee for my services was paid curiously—at night, in cash, carefully counted out under a Cromwell Road lamp post near the Embassy—by arrangement! The reasons for this strange ceremony I never found out.

In due course Siam became Thailand, and Dr Niyomsen was appointed the first Professor of Forensic Medicine to the University of Bangkok at about the same time that I became the first holder of the Chair at Guy's. I never met him again; but twenty years after the trial, when I at last went to Bangkok, on a lecture visit to the Medico-Legal Institute, I found myself face to face, so to speak, with him, for on entering the main hall, there, preserved in a position of honour in the Institute in a most beautiful glass case, was—his skeleton! Macabre, yes, but a touching Oriental mark of affection for their late Chief, who had died two years earlier.

I went also to the Barompiman Palace—as an ordinary visitor—and was shown, among other things, the Royal Bedroom in which King Ananda had been shot. 'Do you know anything about the case?' asked my university graduate guide. I murmured interest only, and she set out the facts—accurately. I remained silent, merely thanking her for her courtesy: it was, after all, only history.