

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 79LIFE
May 1984

MYSTERY OF THE THAI SILK KING

**AMERICAN JIM THOMPSON HAS
NOT BEEN SEEN SINCE '67,
AND SOME BLAME THE C.I.A.**

BY ROBERT SAM ANSON

The promises in the tourist brochures about Bangkok, Thailand, are true. It is an exotic place, filled with golden pagodas and tinkling temple bells; lissome, beautiful women and smiling, dark-skinned men; saffron-robed monks burning incense to images of Lord Buddha, and elephants trumpeting under glistening loads of teak; hawkers in the markets haggling over elaborate brocades and mounds of sapphires, emeralds and rubies that may or may not be fakes; flocks of wild parakeets screeching in the steamy night—thus is the magic of the land that is ancient Siam.

Adventurers have come here, lured by the mystery: thieves, dreamers, Conrad and Maugham. And, if one day you join them, do not expect to understand it; it is said that even the Thai do not. But one thing is certain. There will come a moment—perhaps while you are gliding down one of the inky canals the Thai call *klongs* or sipping a Coconut Cooler on the veranda of the Oriental Hotel or staring openmouthed at the bejeweled splendor that is Wat

Po—when someone will sidle up to you and in tones of low confidentiality, eyes occasionally darting to see which of the spirits is listening, tell you the tale of the Thai Silk King.

His name was Jim Thompson, and there has been no one quite like him in Asia. He was an American, a war hero, a silk merchant, a millionaire and an art collector, and he built himself a house that is one of the wonders of the East. People like Henry Ford II and Katharine Hepburn and Bobby Kennedy came to dine with him and were charmed. Then one day—it was Easter Sunday, 1967, to be exact—he took a walk in the Cameron Highlands of Malaysia and never came back.

There were theories about what befell him as improbable and fantastic as the man himself. At the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand, they held a "Jim Thompson Night" a few weeks ago and, over bitter Singha beer, debated his fate as hotly as they did 17 years ago. There was, for instance, the feeling . . . But that is getting ahead of the story.

To unravel what became of Jim Thompson, to know him as a man, you have to begin where he did, in a different place, a long time ago.

James Harrison Wilson Thompson was born in 1906 to a world where tradition and breeding mattered. His particular part of that world was Greenville, Del., a horsey-set suburb of Wilmington. His father, Henry Thompson, was proprietor of a textile company and chairman of the state Republican party. His mother, Elinor, was the daughter of a Civil War general and a doyenne of Wilmington society. The home they made for themselves and their five children was a rambling fieldstone farm set down on 14 acres and maintained by a full-time staff of 10, among them a Swiss governess who taught Jim, the adored baby of the family, to speak French.

Like his father and uncles before him, Jim prepped at St. Paul's boarding school in New Hamp-

Continued

shire en route to Princeton. Graduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania School of Architecture followed, and afterward he joined a New York firm and settled down to what appeared to be a steady, if unspectacular, career designing homes for the East Coast rich. During those years Thompson squired debutantes and involved himself in such socially correct undertakings as the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. Seemingly, it was the perfect life. But there was a part of him that was restless, and in 1940, without explaining why either to family or friends, he enlisted as a private in the Delaware National Guard.

When the war broke out he was commissioned a lieutenant and eventually posted to Fort Monroe, Va. There Thompson met two people who were to profoundly affect his life. The first was Pat Thraves, a ravishing blond former Powers model and horse-woman from Middleburg, Va. Thompson promptly fell in love with her, and after a brief, passionate courtship, they were married. The second person was a recent West Point graduate named Edwin Black. Worried that the war in Europe was about to pass them by, Black persuaded Thompson to come with him to Washington to join an outfit that promised plenty of intrigue and action. Called the Office of Strategic Services, it was the forerunner of the CIA.

While Thompson was in Europe, blowing up communication centers and railroad tracks behind German lines, Pat was in New York, falling in love with another man. The news staggered Thompson, and he immediately volunteered for service in the China-Burma-India theater. Promoted to lieutenant colonel, he was sent to Ceylon to train a group of "Free Thai" guerrillas. Their mission was to parachute into central Thailand and organize resistance against the Japanese occupiers. Thompson, then 39, took the course in parachuting and jungle survival techniques right along with them. The jump was set for

August 14, 1945. But as the C-47 bearing Thompson and his raiders flew toward the target, the pilot received a radio message. World War II was over; the Japanese had surrendered.

Four days later, Thompson and a handful of other officers flew to Bangkok. They arrived to find a garrison of 105,000 dispirited Japanese and, as one American who lived there during the time put it, a place that seemed not so much a national capital as "a quaint, rather down-at-the-heels Oriental country town." In Bangkok, at least, the war had not been devastating, and after the Japanese had been sent home, Thompson had plenty of time to explore up-country. During one of his excursions, to the northern provincial capital of Chiang Mai, he noticed there were looms in many of the houses. When he inquired about their purpose, he was told they were for the weaving of silk but that the art had virtually ceased to exist. He was, however, shown one pile of the finished cloth. It was gleaming and iridescent, yet with a curiously rough texture. Altogether, it was the most extraordinary fabric Thompson had ever seen, and it gave him an idea for the future.

In the meantime, having resigned from the OSS, Thompson was serving as the U.S. embassy's political officer, a job that entailed sorting out not only all the contending factions in Thailand but those on the French-occupied Indochinese peninsula as well. It was sensitive, clandestine work, and in the course of it Thompson came to know many of the leaders of postwar Southeast Asia—along with many who would ultimately take to the jungles to oppose them. One of the closest contacts he made was Pridi Phanomyong, a lawyer of immense charm who, during the war, had served as regent to the young Thai king. Pridi's position put him in the palace, where, literally under the Japanese noses, he had organized the Free Thai resistance, operating under the legendary code name of "Ruth."

Pridi rose to become prime minister—a title he was not destined to keep. In June 1946 the Thai king, Ananda, was found shot dead in his bed. Though the evidence suggested suicide, Pridi's opponents claimed it was murder and that Pridi was behind it. Though Thompson and Pridi's other American friends refused to believe the charge, he was nonetheless forced from office. A group of right-wing generals took over in a coup, and after a disastrous countercoup attempt of his own, Pridi fled the country, settling finally in China.

By then Thompson had decided to remain in Thailand permanently. "I often wake up in the morning and wonder why I am here and how I ever got involved in all of this," he wrote to his sister Elinor. "I must say I enjoy it and there are enough interesting people to talk to whenever you feel like it, and there is always something that pleases the eye, whether it's a sunset on the river, or a little Chinese temple all lit up at night I was always fascinated by the *Arabian Nights* when I was young, and this part of the world is very much like that."

The more concrete reason for Thompson's decision to stay was business. After resigning from the embassy, he had joined with other investors to take over the dilapidated Oriental Hotel. But after a falling-out among the partners, Thompson decided to try his hand at selling silk. He found a group of weavers living on the edge of a *klong* in a Muslim enclave known as Bangkrua. Amid considerable skepticism, he persuaded them to weave the fabric in salable lengths and to replace the easily faded vegetable dyes they had been using with aniline dyes from Switzerland. The colors and patterns were selected by Thompson himself. As Maxine North, wife of a Hollywood screenwriter, who arrived in Thailand in 1950,

Continued

remembers, he also did his own marketing. "My husband and I were checking into the Oriental," she recalls, "and there was this American man standing in the lobby with a bunch of silk slung over his arm. Naturally, I was curious, so I went over to talk to him," she continues. "Two days later, I went over to his shop, a little hole in the wall on the end of Suriwong Road. Jim began draping silk all over me. 'This is you,' he would say, and he made you believe it. He really was the most fantastic salesman in the whole world. That day I bought my first piece of silk, a shimmering lavender, and had it made into a dress." "It's a funny business," Thompson wrote in a letter home, "almost like being a missionary, but with prettier results. I'm afraid," he announced, "I could never be happy with the New York-Wilmington life."

The silk for Thompson's fabrics came from the impoverished northeast, an area that would later prove fertile for Communist insurgency, and on his frequent buying trips up-country, Thompson saw and learned much. His Republican political predisposition turned liberal Democratic, and among friends he was outspoken in his opposition to colonialism. "With all the fine, high principles our country was founded on," he wrote sister Elinor in 1949, "it is ghastly to think that we should support such a foul, filthy, corrupt, brutal regime as we have in French Indochina." Then he added a prescient footnote: "If we ever wanted to win, now it will have to be by brute force and by annihilating the better part of the population, as they hate us so."

Such sentiments were unpopular in Thailand, and others had paid dearly for expressing them. A number of Pridi's allies who had been friends of Thompson's were murdered while in police custody, and Thompson's most trusted assistant was kidnapped, driven to a deserted area, then stabbed to death and buried facedown so that his spirit could not reach nirvana. Afterward, Thompson hid

several of the remaining Indo-Chinese who worked for him, until he could arrange their escape from the country. He also became far more cautious about his own political comments. Years later, when asked about his postwar involvements, he would say only, "There is nothing to talk about. All my friends are dead."

The silk business, meanwhile, continued to prosper, boosted by Thompson's social contacts in New York. During one of Thompson's annual fall trips to the States, *Vanity Fair* editor Frank Crowninshield, a pal from deb-party days in the '30s, introduced him to Edna Woolman Chase, editor of *Vogue* and the then reigning grande dame of American fashion. Mrs. Chase looked at the silks Thompson had piled on her desk and announced to her secretary that none of the staff were to leave the office until they, too, had beheld this marvel. As word spread, Hollywood began to seek Thompson out, and he provided the fabric for many of the costumes in *The King and I* and later for *Ben-Hur* as well. Before long, a stop at Jim Thompson's became a must on any tour of Asia.

The press of visitors helped convince Thompson that he needed new quarters. So did his growing art collection. Thompson had begun collecting shortly after the war—only the occasional piece at first, but as his eye sharpened, gradually more and more. He roamed back alleys and country villages incessantly seeking finds. On one such expedition, to the former Thai capital, Ayutthaya, he was accompanied by a Thai princess, her husband and "Red" Jantzen, the then CIA station chief in Bangkok. Also along was Thompson's nephew Henry, a stockbroker from New York. As they toured the ruins of the ancient city, Thompson discoursed at length on Thai culture and architecture, much to the amazement of the princess, who told him, "You know more about this country than I do, and I'm a native." Finally, they chanced on a man who was selling a small porcelain bowl. Henry was not im-

pressed. "To me," he recalls, "it looked like something you would feed the cat from. But Uncle Jim was not deterred. He asked the man who owned it how much he wanted for it, and the man said seventy-five dollars. Of course, you're supposed to bargain, but Jim never did. 'Pay the man seventy-five, Henry,' he said to me. When we got back to Bangkok, Jim had someone look at the bowl. Of course, it turned out to be Ming."

Thompson began construction on his new showcase for such finds in 1958. The residence, set on slightly more than an acre of ground directly across the *klong* from Bangkrua, was of his own design and consisted of six small, traditional Thai houses he had brought down by raft from Ayutthaya and linked together. But it was the art, and the manner in which Thompson displayed it, that was most impressive. Somerset Maugham, who came to dine one night, complimented him: "You have not only beautiful things, but what is rare, you have arranged them with faultless taste."

Virtually every night there was a distinguished dinner guest at what came to be called the House on the Klong. If it was not Adlai Stevenson, then it was Ethel Merman, belting "Hello, Dolly!" to Cocky, the pet cockatoo, who perched on Thompson's shoulder and amused guests by sipping after-dinner liqueur. All came to bask in the presence of the Thai Silk King. He regaled them all—celebrities, friends, tourists he'd met that day in the shop—talking in a low-pitched monotone, the boarding-school accent impeccably intact. Years later his guests could still recount the evenings in detail: the drinks on the veranda, the cooled-down version of spicy Thai food served on a pair of inlaid gaming tables made for the palace of King Chulalongkorn, the servants bustling in and out on stockinged feet, the laughter and joking and smart conversation.

Continued

But mostly they remembered Thompson. For all his bonhomie and seeming accessibility, there was a part of him, deep down and mysterious, they could never seem to know.

He was, according to the few people who really did know him, including Ed Black, who had stayed in the Army and came to Thailand as a general, an essentially lonely man. As nephew Henry put it, "He was the sort who sells tickets to the Christmas bash but never comes." He had his affairs (with men as well as women, say his friends), but there was always a distance. "People warn me about the future and how awful it is to live alone," he wrote to Elinor. Someday, he conceded, he might "turn into an eccentric old recluse and sit in the midst of my treasures," but for the moment he was content. "The people of Asia are so sensible and practical," he wrote. "There are never any great loves or romances here."

One of the other curiosities about Thompson was that for all the years he spent in Thailand, he never learned to speak more than a few phrases of the language. Yet, in most respects, he was more Thai than the Thai. He refused to refer to his adopted land by the name it had taken in 1939. To him it would always be Siam. Similarly, while many modern Siamese, as Thompson called them, were busily installing air conditioners, Thompson banned the contraptions from his home. Likewise, he mounted no screens against the mosquitoes that nightly swarmed in from the *klong*.

Temperamentally, he was just as quirky. Placid most of the time, he was nonetheless possessed of fearsome rage, and after a petty disagreement he refused to speak for more than a decade with one couple who had been among his closest friends. Yet with the Thai he was more understanding. At one point it was discovered that one of his oldest, most trusted Thai assistants was taking huge kickbacks and had been systematically looting the shop. Thomp-

son, however, refused to believe it—even after the assistant quit and opened up a silk shop of his own directly across from Thompson's establishment. Finally, the scoundrel went bankrupt, and Thompson, to the surprise of no one, hired him back. "Jim's attitude about things like that was very Thai," notes William Warren, his friend and biographer. "He simply pretended they didn't exist."

In his personal habits, Thompson lived with almost exaggerated simplicity. He dressed plainly and, despite his renowned dinner parties, was no gourmet. The press, which lionized him, referred continually to the "Thai Silk Millionaire," which was true only in the most literal sense of the word. He did have a million dollars, which was left to him by a distant cousin, and it sat in a Philadelphia bank. He touched it only once, when he withdrew \$58,000 to buy the land for his house. The rest of the time he lived off his salary, which, at the time of his disappearance, was only \$10,000 per year. Even the silk company was not truly his, but was controlled instead by Thai investors. Thompson himself never owned more than 20 percent of the stock, and over the years he gave a number of his shares away.

His attitude was best expressed in his continuing letters home to Elinor. In 1948, when the demands of the silk business were beginning to overwhelm him, he wrote, "I have two Lao families so wrapped up in it for their livelihood that I feel duty bound to keep it going just for them if for nobody else. If I had pulled out, they would have nothing to live on, and their children couldn't go to school." Thirteen years later, after many of his employees had grown rich, started businesses of their own and sent their children off to college, he was still not ready to return to the States. "I am afraid," he wrote, "that I like backward places that need to be developed better than all the high-powered superhigh-

ways, motels and gigantic cities at home. I do love the color and general confusion of the Far East. There is so much to see and learn out here. Also, I do feel that I am being useful." But there was a trace of wistfulness, of somehow feeling out of place. "My life," he confided to his sister, "seems miles apart from anybody else's."

The spring of 1967 was a very busy time for Thompson. In addition to managing the silk business and the usual crowd of tourists, he was supervising the construction of a new and vastly expanded shop. The cottage industry he had discovered two decades before now employed 20,000 weavers nationwide and brought millions to the Thai economy. But whatever pride Thompson felt was leavened by exhaustion. So on Easter weekend, he wangled an invitation to visit old friends in Malaysia.

The cool of the country's Cameron Highlands, nearly 7,000 feet above sea level, has long made the area a favored retreat for the sweltering residents of Bangkok and Singapore. During colonial times the British in Malaya (as it was then called) sent troops there on convalescent leave, and their presence, which lingered on through the 1960s, gave the lush green valleys and jungled hills a faintly English air. But beyond the golf courses and good hotels, most of the Highlands remained wild. There were tigers and cobras and tribes of aborigines who hunted with blowguns and poisoned darts. But it was the jungle itself—vast and trackless, laced with creeper vines and hidden ravines 100 feet deep—that was most forbidding. Even today hikers who dare to chance it are given a list of warnings. The first is the most important: "Never walk alone."

Thompson appreciated the beauty and peace of the place, as did his host, T. G. Ling, a Chinese doctor from Singapore, and his American-born wife, Helen. In 1960 they had acquired a Tudor-style bungalow at the crest of a lovely ridge. The place was called

Continued

Moonlight Cottage, a name that belied its bloody past. During Malaya's Communist insurrection in the 1950s, Moonlight had served as command post for one of the guerrilla groups, and in the garden where Helen now grew roses, summary executions had taken place.

Thompson had stayed with the Lings on two occasions before and particularly enjoyed daily treks through the jungle. Though he was 61 and not in the best of health (he suffered from gallstones and had just recovered from a bout of pneumonia), he prided himself on his stamina and his knowledge of bush lore.

His first morning in the Highlands, Thompson and Dr. Ling set off down one of the trails. It was a new one, and before long, the two men were lost. Eventually, Thompson spotted a stream and, following accepted practice, traced it until it brought them to more familiar surroundings. The adventure, however brief, was elating, and the rest of that day and evening Thompson was in ebullient spirits.

The next morning, Easter Sunday, they all attended services at a small Anglican church, then returned to the cottage to prepare a hamper for a picnic that had been planned the day before. The picnic had been his idea, but Thompson seemed unaccountably restless, and they had hardly finished lunch before he was gathering up the plates and rejecting all pleas that they linger for a nap in the sun.

It was 2:30 when they got back to the cottage. The Lings retired to their bedroom, leaving Jim sitting in the living room. Shortly after three p.m., the Lings heard footsteps crunching on the gravel driveway. They assumed Jim was going for a walk. Thinking nothing of it, they drifted off to sleep.

Alarmed when Thompson failed to return by nightfall, the Lings alerted the local police, and early the next morning a handful of officers began combing the area. More searchers, including a group of British soldiers on leave in the Highlands, quickly joined in, and by Monday afternoon nearly a hundred people were

crisscrossing the trails, crying "Jim! Jim!" There was no reply, nor any sign of his presence, not so much as a single footprint or broken twig. Nor, to their relief, were any vultures circling overhead.

The next day, Tuesday, the search party was augmented by the arrival of a sizable contingent of Malaysian Field Force police, along with 30 local aborigines who knew the jungle trails intimately. By the end of the day, almost 400 people—the largest search party ever mounted in Malaysia—were looking for Thompson, among them a *bomoh*, or witch doctor. After going into a trance, he declared that the missing American was alive but held captive by evil spirits in the jungle.

On Wednesday General Ed Black flew down from his headquarters in northeastern Thailand to take over personal command of the effort. He brought with him three military helicopters, but they proved of little use in the dense triple-canopy jungle.

By then, Thompson's disappearance was making front-page headlines around the world. In Bangkok the news was greeted with shock by some, but by many others with mirth. Jim, mischievous devil that he was, must surely be playing a prank. In a day or two, certainly not more than a week, he would be back, entertaining his dinner guests with tales of his latest adventure.

But a week passed, and Thompson did not return, and around Bangkok people suddenly began to worry. His friends put up \$10,000 reward money for information leading to Thompson's recovery; the sum was later increased to \$25,000. There were less conventional stratagems as well. At one point, several days after Thompson's disappearance, a young Thai woman presented herself at the Thai Silk Company and said that if she were given use of a room, she would reveal Thompson's whereabouts at that very moment. Willing to try anything, Silk Company executives complied. The lights were dimmed, candles and joss sticks were lit, and the woman hung on

the wall a square of white cloth on which, she claimed, Thompson's employees would be able to see their boss "just like on TV." They saw nothing. The woman, however, claimed to have observed Thompson quite clearly. He was being held at gunpoint, she announced, by two young men.

In the Highlands, meanwhile, the search was continuing with no more success than before, and ominous new questions were being raised. Why, for example, had Thompson, a chain smoker, left his cigarettes in his room? The suspicions deepened after the arrival of Richard Noone, a British planning officer with SEATO in Bangkok. A Cambridge-trained anthropologist with considerable experience in the Highlands, Noone brought along a border scout from North Borneo and an aborigine *bomoh* who had once helped him locate a missing man in the jungle. For 36 hours they trekked deep into the bush and interviewed a number of aborigines. When Noone emerged, he stated flatly, "I am fully convinced that Mr. Thompson is not lost in the jungle."

That seemed to eliminate another theory, floated briefly, that Thompson had committed suicide. His friends insisted that, whatever his troubles, depression was not one of them. There was only one other possibility: He had been kidnapped. The question was by whom?

That point was still being argued when in mid-April a most redoubtable figure entered the case. His name was Peter Hurkos. A Dutchman, Hurkos was at that time perhaps the most famous psychic in the world, largely because of his role in helping to track the notorious Boston Strangler. Hurkos did not succeed in identifying the strangler, but he did provide the police with harrowingly accurate descriptions of several of the murders and managed, simply by touching one of the many confession letters that came in, to provide a precise description of the writer. Hurkos also told the police intimate things about themselves, such as

Continued

informing one young officer, correctly, that a few hours earlier he had been making love to his wife on the kitchen table. Hurkos evidently was a man with considerable gifts, and Thompson's family, frustrated by the lack of progress in the case, brought him to Asia.

On his arrival at Moonlight Cottage, Hurkos paced the house and garden restlessly, as if searching for psychic clues. Finally, he sat down on the veranda and laid out a photograph of Thompson and two maps, one of Asia, the other of the Highlands. His face tensed. Then all at once he began talking, the words gushing out in disconnected bursts.

He was sitting in the chair ... right there ... he was not sitting in the house ... the chair was on the veranda ... ag, Prebl, oogh ... Thompson ... Prebl, Pridi ... fourteen people ... fourteen people captured him ... he is not in the jungle....

After some minutes Hurkos completed his vision and then began to amplify and clarify his story. According to the William Warren biography, the psychic declared that Thompson had been met on the veranda by a man he knew. They had walked down the road together; then, after half a mile or so, the man suddenly knocked Thompson out with morphine. At that point a truck, disguised to look like a Malaysian army vehicle, pulled up with 13 men inside dressed in green uniforms. The men, claimed Hurkos, were Communists, and after hustling Thompson aboard the truck, they took him somewhere, then moved him out of the country by plane. A few minutes later, while he was drinking coffee, Hurkos jumped up and pointed at one of the maps. "There!" he exclaimed excitedly. "That's where he is now! Cambodia! That's where he is. I'd give my neck on it."

The press, meanwhile, was quickly coming to similar conclusions. The Asian edition of LIFE suggested that Thompson might have been captured so that the Communists could brainwash him and then produce him as a defector, denouncing the U.S.

presence in Thailand. Given Thompson's influence, the government might be persuaded to close the U.S. air bases in Thailand that were then being used to pulverize North Vietnam.

There were other speculations in Bangkok, encouraged in part by Hurkos's mention of "Prebl, Pridi," whom the Thai naturally took to be the former prime minister. Suppose Pridi had arranged to meet Thompson in the Highlands, to sound him out on the possibility of mounting a new coup. According to this scenario, Thompson discouraged his old friend, at which point Pridi, worried that Thompson might talk, kidnapped him. The only problem with the story was that Pridi, later questioned in Paris, resolutely and convincingly denied any knowledge of what had befallen Thompson.

The most tantalizing and persistent theory linked Thompson's disappearance to Vietnam. Around Bangkok his involvement with, and sympathies for, various Indochinese nationalists was well known. It was also said that he was a personal friend of Ho Chi Minh's, a frequently repeated assertion that Thompson, typically, neither confirmed nor denied. According to General Black, one of the few people Thompson confided in about political matters, he was also close to the Cambodian leader, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, and "helped Sihanouk get a better deal from the French than either the Lao or the Vietnamese got." Moreover, Thompson had also spent considerable time in Laos and, Black says, "was the only man who could get the three Lao princes [neutralist, pro-Western and Communist] to sit down at the same dinner table." Adding to the Vietnam speculation was Thompson's correspondence with Elinor, which, at least during his early days in Bangkok, was frequently and bitterly critical of U.S. policy. At one point Thompson suggested that the U.S. ambassador, a particularly gung-ho anti-Communist, "should have his neck wrung." In another letter, Thompson bemoaned the fact that the U.S. "always seems to back the wrong horse. It makes

me sick," he added, "to see these little countries get torn to pieces by the Communist powers and us."

Yet before his disappearance, Thompson's ardor for the Indochinese cause seemed to have cooled. At one dinner party he delivered a tongue-lashing to a prominent New York visitor, Marietta Tree, who had been condemning the U.S. role in Vietnam as immoral. "His expressed attitude," says a friend, "was that it was probably a mistake for us to be there, but now that we were there, we couldn't leave. What he really believed, God only knows."

The speculations, in any case, did not assist in finding him, and after 10 days the search in the Highlands was formally terminated. Unofficially, the hunt continued, not only in the Highlands, where the arrival of assorted *bomohs* had created a bizarre, carnival air, but also in Bangkok, where the various explanations for Thompson's disappearance ranged from being captured by a love-starved Malaysian princess to having offended the gods by placing an incorrect spirit at the top of his house. A British mind reader, then appearing in a Bangkok nightclub, stated with equal certainty that Thompson, in the manner of an old elephant, had gone into the jungle looking for a secret place to die. Another report had Thompson living in Peking, having traveled there at the invitation of the Chinese government, which had paid him \$1 million (supposedly on deposit at a Hong Kong bank) to establish a Chinese rival to the Thai silk industry. All of the stories—and there were dozens—were checked out. All of them came to naught.

Thompson's friends, however, remained determined. One theory that particularly captured their attention came from an Australian nightclub performer and former major in the British Army named Robert McGowan. McGowan claimed that, in a vision, he had seen Thompson being held captive in a two-story

Continued

house in Stung Treng, Cambodia. There are many two-story houses in Cambodia, but this one was identifiable, according to McGowan, because there was a wagon wheel leaning against it. Several of Thompson's friends, including Maxine North and a pilot for the CIA's Air America, were prepared to take him seriously, particularly after McGowan demonstrated his extrasensory bonafides by driving through Bangkok's hectic traffic—blindfolded.

The plan they hatched called for the Air America pilot to feign engine trouble over Stung Treng land, find the house with the wagon wheel, then, with the aid of a Gurkha lieutenant who had been recruited for the expedition, burst in and rescue Thompson. But before the scheme could be put into operation, the CIA got wind of it and stopped the flight. Undaunted, the Gurkha lieutenant made his way to Stung Treng and spent two weeks there in a vain search for a two-story house with a wagon wheel leaning against it.

Then in late August, just as the leads were beginning to diminish, there occurred a grisly tragedy that reignited interest in the case. In Bucks County, Pa., Thompson's eldest sister, Katherine—the ex-daughter-in-law of the former governor-general of the Philippines, Leonard Wood—was found bludgeoned to death. Thompson and his sister were not close, and the police discounted any connection between his disappearance and her death, but that did not deter the more conspiratorial observers of the matter. In their minds, there had to be a link. After all, they pointed out, Katherine's farmhouse had been ransacked, but her valuables had been left untouched, as if her killer were looking for something—revealing letters from her brother, perhaps.

Katherine's killer was never found, the link was never proved, and as time passed, even the most diehard of Thompson's friends gradually began to give up hope. Finally, in 1974, seven years after Thompson's disappearance, a Thai court, at the request of Thompson's family, declared the Thai Silk King legally dead.

But his legend, and the mystery of what became of him, live on. While Thompson's family, and many of his associates, are now prepared to accept an innocent explanation for his disappearance—he was lost, fell down a ravine, was eaten by a tiger—there are just as many others who will never buy it.

Thompson's friend Richard Hughes, the late, fabled Hong Kong correspondent for the London *Sunday Times*, went to his grave believing that Thompson was on a mission for the CIA when he disappeared. Hughes's reasoning was simple. Thompson had been a "spook" for the OSS, and, as Hughes put it in one of the many columns he wrote about the Thompson case, "once a CIA man, always a CIA man."

Thompson's family wondered about a possible CIA link as well, and several months after his disappearance made discreet inquiries with officials in Washington. The agency professed ignorance about Thompson's fate and insisted that he had no CIA affiliation. But an agency man assured one of Thompson's Bangkok friends, "You can be certain we are turning over every rock looking for him. Jim was OSS. He was one of ours."

General Black, now retired, is not satisfied. "Jimmy," he notes, "was a loyal alumnus of OSS, and if the government wanted him to do anything, he would have done it. He wouldn't have minded if it was a little bit dangerous. That would have been stimulating to him." Black is still troubled by the U.S. government's handling of the case. Embassy personnel in both Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur, the Malaysian capital, he says, "showed a singular lack of interest in doing anything remotely active. I knew them pretty well," he goes on, "but I couldn't get anywhere with them. They were completely unhelpful. The State Department was afraid of making political waves. Their attitude was, the sooner the Thompson case was forgotten, the better." Black reports running into similar stonewalling from the CIA. "I couldn't get anywhere

with those guys," he recalls. "They were patting me on the head, trying to give me the run-around. It was as if they knew something that I didn't know, or couldn't jeopardize their careers because this was a politically sensitive thing," Black shrugs. "Maybe they knew he was dead."

The CIA still refuses to comment on Thompson, other than to say that the agency's files contain "a number of items" about him. The agency refuses to divulge those items, however, under a law that empowers it to keep secret "official titles, salaries or numbers of personnel employed by the agency." Thompson himself never discussed his intelligence connections, past or present. "His attitude about OSS," says a friend, "was that it was a closed chapter, and he didn't want to talk about it." Once, though, he did make jocular reference to an alleged CIA affiliation. In a 1960 letter to Elinor he reported that the king's mother and the minister of the interior had been trying to obtain a decoration for him, but that it was unlikely he would get it, because the minister of foreign affairs believed he was working for the CIA. Thompson commented, "If I did, I would really be the boy wonder. I don't know how they think I have the time to do all my sleuthing around in addition to the silk and tourist business."

Whatever the truth of Thompson's identity and whether or not the CIA was involved in his disappearance, his friends agree on one fact: Thompson would have relished the controversy. He was a man who was aware of his legend and, according to his friend William Warren, worked hard to perpetuate it. "He built up the character that was Jim Thompson," Warren said in Bangkok one recent humid night. "He embroidered stories. He let people wonder whether he might or might not be a spook. Actually, he wanted them to believe it. It made him larger than life. He was bored with the truth, and when he disappeared, it caught up with him."

Continued

Bangkok today is very different from the "Oriental country town" Jim Thompson fell in love with. Most of the *klongs* that made it "the Venice of the East" have been filled in to better accommodate the traffic that makes it seem more like the Los Angeles of Asia. The formerly ramshackle old Oriental Hotel has been expanded and modernized into what, according to a survey of American bankers, is the finest in the world. It probably would amuse Thompson to know that a \$300-per-night suite has been christened in his honor.

Thompson's silk company continues to thrive, selling 10 times the volume it did before his disappearance. But the weavers of Bangkrua are mostly gone, victims of progress and their own prosperity. Today most of the work is done up-country in a factory that Thompson, with his love of the old ways, would have hated. Everything has changed in Bangkok, perhaps for the better, perhaps for the worse.

One thing, though, remains the same. They still talk about Jim Thompson, still wonder what happened to him on that sunny Easter afternoon. A Frenchman and a Japanese have written novels based on Thompson's life, and the BBC has made a movie. The best account—Warren's 1970 biography, *The Legendary American*—continues to sell, and the author says he gets dozens of letters each year, many of them offering

explanations of their own. Maxine North, who still has that shimmering lavender silk dress she bought 34 years ago, insists that the CIA has a man in Bangkok, detailed to do nothing else except "keep what happened to Jim under wraps."

At the House on the Klong, they don't pay much attention to any of this. Jim's servants know that he is coming back. While they wait, they maintain his house as a museum in which nothing has been changed. "You know Jim's temper," explains Henry, his nephew and heir. "He'd hate having his things moved." The dining room table is set, as if the master and his guests are expected for dinner. His clothes remain in the closets, and at night the lights in the living room still burn bright. If one day you go to Bangkok, there is a young Thai girl who will show you Jim's treasures, and if, as surely you will, you ask her what happened to the Thai Silk King, she will giggle nervously, as the Thai do when they are anxious not to offend. And then she will say, "Nobody knows." ♠