A Very Private Enterprise

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BY THE AUTHOR OF *Death in the Garden*

Chapter 1

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL EVENING for a party, the night Hugo Frencham was killed.

It was April and the soft tropical darkness lay over the city like a cashmere shawl on a bare arm, trapping the warmth rising from the earth, meshing with the trees and buildings as filaments of wool with the fine hairs of the skin. In the Turnells' garden, where the party was to be held, tiny lights glimmered under pierced terracotta lids. Visible as darker masses against the sky, the trees and shrubs enclosed the lawn with a heavy scent only bearable diluted by the warm, dark air.

Later, Janey was to assert that no one could know what happened that evening; that only Hugo and one other could have any real knowledge of what had occurred, and that even for them, perhaps, it had been hard to understand, confused, unreal.

Had Hugo any foreboding of his own death? He

was certainly uneasy, revolving many cares like a prayer wheel in his mind. He had, rather reluctantly, arrived at the party early. He had had to leave several interesting objects which he had just bought from a dealer that evening. If he had been free he would have spent a far pleasanter time examining them in detail, the spotlight shining over his shoulder on the liquid gleam of the silver, the intricate surface lifted into clear relief under the huge eye of the magnifying glass. But it was expected of him, as a friend and neighbour, to be among the first and he had accordingly set down the tranquil figure of the Buddha placing beside it the knife with its slim, pointed blade and elaborately patterned handle. As he left the house he had glanced at the statue and the knife lying on the side table in a pyramid of light from the lamp. The fascination that they exerted lay in the retreat they offered from the problems closing in on him. Both through the philosophy they stood for and the artistry with which they had been created they offered the spirit an escape. Perhaps that was a form of premonition.

The rest of the house was in darkness as he locked the door behind him and strolled along the road to the Turnells'. Tables were set out under the trees. The candles on them burned evenly in the still air, their flames like golden tear drops in the centre of a haze of light. The glow glossed the talking faces, the eating hands. The waterfall noise of voices was a background to the sharper chinking of glass and silver.

Hugo's head was bent to listen to his neighbour; his face was intent as if absorbed in her words, but his mind was on the objects left in the lamplight next door. Concentration on them could blot out the many other

things which he did not wish to think of in a way that the conversation never could. His glass was refilled and he lifted it, nodding in agreement with he was not sure what. As he took a mouthful he looked through the trees at the dim roofline of his own house. No light came from it; inside, like gold in a box, were the figure and the ritual knife which in a few hours he could examine again.

The buffet was laid out in the dining-room and soon people began to move in to help themselves to pudding. Hugo stood on the verandah talking in a group of men as the women gathered round the table. This time as he glanced at the end of the garden he saw a light shining through the branches. He made no move until his hostess came to urge them to take some food. He waited while the others went into the dining-room before saying, "Maggie, I'm so sorry. I shall have to go. I'll just slip away. Apologise to Alan for me."

She looked a little startled and said, "Of course. Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes. I'm sorry about this. Goodbye." He edged away along the verandah leaving her looking momentarily bewildered.

At the door he was caught by Ranjit Singh. He had avoided him thus far; there was now no escape. So it was another twenty minutes before he was able to let himself out of the Turnells' front door and walk rapidly down the drive. He saw no one, only the feet of a sleeping driver projecting through the open door of a parked car. The noise of the party was a muffled blare behind him as he approached his own house.

The door was still locked. He let himself in and looked into the drawing-room in front of him. It was empty. The verandah doors were open, and the Buddha

and the ritual knife lay still in the circle of lamplight.

"Where are you?" he called. He had projected his voice at the stairs and was looking in that direction as he hesitated by the little table. So he had to turn when the reply came from behind him.

"Here."

Beyond the verandah a figure moved in the darkness.

"I'm here."

She was standing on the lawn looking at the sky. Hugo paused a moment longer, then, picking up the two silver objects, he walked slowly outside.

"When did you get here?" His tone was reproachful, reasonable rather than angry. "What are you doing? You should be in bed, you know you should." She turned towards him; she was outside the fall of light from the drawing-room windows, merely a darker shape against the dim garden.

"Hugo, I had to see you."

Hugo sat down on the cane sofa facing the lawn. He put down the statue and the knife on the glass table and placed the Buddha full-face towards him. He touched the top of its head with his finger-tips. He wished she would go. She was speaking torrentially now. Why couldn't she leave it? Women always wanted to rake things over, discuss them, when they were finished and better left for dead. At this point his mind swerved; he lifted the Buddha and started to revolve it in his grasp.

His obsession with the statue and the knife was the only warning that he received of his imminent death. For Hugo the last few minutes of his life were a series of sensations so rapid that the mind could only register, not interpret, them: a silver arc flashing into the night, his surge of rage and desire as he leapt to find it, the searing

pain and the fall into darkness.

So, as far as Hugo was concerned, Janey was probably right. Perhaps there was a split second of understanding that what had happened to him was death; or perhaps it was incomprehending blankness that engulfed him and he, like so many others who became involved in the affair, never knew what happened.

Chapter 2

THE HEAD OF CHANCERY, Hugo Frencham, was found dead on the morning of Tuesday 1 May. His body was discovered at about 6.30 a.m. by his bearer, Jogiram, in the garden of his bungalow within the High Commission compound.

The body had been disturbed by the time that the High Commission doctor, Dr Mason, arrived on the scene at approximately 7.15. Its original position was some ten feet from the edge of the covered verandah, lying on the lawn facing the house. The cause of death

As soon as the ticking of rapid two-fingered typing ceased the hushed roar of the air conditioning swelled up to replace it. The typist rolled the paper up a couple

of turns in the machine and leaned back to look over what he had written. He was a tall man on the verge of middle age, the signs of which were visible in the fading blond hair receding from his forehead, giving his bony face a highbrowed appearance it had probably lacked in his youth.

His eyes moved from his paper to the garden. Framing the view of the lawn was the harsh pink of bougainvillea which climbed the posts and sprawled along the roof of the verandah. It was just under the lower sprays that Jogiram had found his master's body.

Sinclair had taken him over his actions and reactions time and again until the scene became so clear to him that it seemed a carefully choreographed ballet shown in slow motion.

Jogiram in his white uniform and silent bare feet comes on to the verandah carrying a tray of tea, places it on the cane table and says to no one in particular, "Chhota-hazri, please Sahib." He pads back to the kitchen where he sits on a stool for some minutes. Then, disturbed by the silence, he looks out into the hall. He sees the tea tray untouched so he climbs the stairs to the bedroom. Listening at the door he can hear nothing, none of the splashes, grunts, mucus-clearings of awakening, so tapping softly he goes in. The bed, which he had neatly turned down the previous evening, is unslept in.

Jogiram slowly descends the stairs, unworried, hardly puzzled. He goes to collect the unwanted tray from the verandah. Then, not knowing why, he walks into the garden a few steps, sufficient for his view to clear the mass of the bougainvillea and to see the body beneath it.

Sinclair sighed, and looked again at what he had typed. He would not have said he was an imaginative

man and certainly his appearance and manner did not suggest to others that he was. Yet into the elaborate physical reconstructions that were part of his technique of investigation, there always seemed to enter the ghosts of the emotions felt by the participants of the original scene. As his mind followed Jogiram's actions of that early May morning he could sense the instant of discovery and panic when Jogiram, from a routine-dulled blankness, suddenly lurched to recognition of what he had seen lying under the bougainvillea.

Sinclair continued to stare at the bald sentences of his memorandum. They conveyed nothing of the suddenness and strangeness of that day which he had understood so clearly from Jogiram's broken, vivid English. That was his assignment: to smooth over what had happened, to make those horrible and hurried events anodyne and comprehensible for Whitehall.

Anderson, who had briefed him for the journey, had already made up his mind not to allow events so far away to affect him on either a human or a professional level.

"The Head of Chancery at the High Commission in Delhi has been bumped off," he had said. "Ever come across him? No? Well, no reason why you should, I suppose. Hugo Frencham was his name. I knew him years ago in India in the old days. He went back there as H. of C. a few years ago and now he's got himself killed, knifed apparently. It's probably nothing much."

Anderson was a Scot with a rough red-brown head like bracken and a huge nose, ferns of hair curling from

the nostrils. Thus dismissing the violent death of an old acquaintance, he ruminated for a time, then said, "Sex, possibly."

Sinclair looked vaguely enquiring.

"They get into a lot of mischief like that in the subcontinent. The heat you know. Can't think why they're calling us in. Davey Simpson-Smith of Southern Asia Department in the Foreign Office is pissing himself about it. Ever come across him? No? Well, he's a wee body with a great voice. 'We can't lose a Head of Chancery in such a fashion.'"

He parodied the deep tones of Davey Simpson-Smith, exaggerating the pedantic exactness of the consonants. Like a lot of the senior men in the Security Department, Anderson was ex-Army and had the military man's contempt for the effeteness of all civil servants and the Foreign Office in particular. He laughed at his own mimicry, plucking his nose and leaning back in his chair in high good humour.

"I've called for Frencham's file. Last positive vetting seven years ago. Looks clean to me. But they're flapping about something over there and I'll have to send somebody. I'm giving this to you, Sinclair, because there's not much in it from what I sense and you could do with a break. You've had a bad year or two so a change will do you good. Get away from London." He was now carried away on the flood of his own generosity. "Sort Delhi out as quickly as may be. Write a good clean report to calm all the old women down and then take some leave, why don't you? Kashmir, you know, wonderful at this time of year. Ever been there? No? You should go. I'll tell you what. We'll not expect you back for a month. Come back to the office next month fit as a fiddle after your nice wee

holiday."

Sinclair knew too much of his superior's capacity for self- deception to believe that the trip to Delhi was compensation for a bad couple of years in his personal life.

The time of year, May, was the source of his first suspicion, quickly confirmed by a glance at the list at the back of *The Times* giving the temperatures of the world capitals. The previous day Delhi had recorded forty degrees Celsius. The second suspicion was about the nature of the case. Anderson's judgment that there was not much in it except the sexual excitements of a lively international community was based, Sinclair guessed, on no hard evidence, merely on his superior's memories of the bored wives of Simla in the last days of the Raj. Probably his time as a young subaltern in the Indian Army attached to the Viceroy's staff had been Anderson's sexual heyday, accounting for his curious coupling of heat and sex.

Sinclair's own experience did not bear out this theory. The time he and Teresa had gone to Morocco leaving the four children with her mother had been terrible. She had been made languid, he irritable, by the heat. Admittedly Dominic, their youngest child had been conceived there, but he had not brought greater harmony to their household.

Superficially there was the sexual difficulty. Teresa was a devout Catholic for whom abstinence was the only acceptable way of limiting the size of their family. This deprivation was not, Sinclair found, the immense hardship which society with its obsession with sex would have people believe. Nevertheless, it exacerbated the differences between Teresa and himself. His rationalism and agnosticism became more pronounced and their views

continually conflicted. Abstinence from conversation as well as sex followed and eventually Sinclair moved out of the house; living with a furiously silent woman had become unbearable. One of Teresa's complaints was that he took no notice of his family, immersing himself in his work, so she was surprised when the hostile atmosphere took effect. For Sinclair it was Teresa's forgivingness, her attitude that her absolute rightness would one day be revealed and he could be sure of her compassion and understanding until then and beyond, that finally drove him away.

He said nothing of divorce, nor even of legal separation; indeed, he did not particularly think about them as there was no one else he wanted to marry. Teresa continued to live in the shabby, roomy house in Tulse Hill while Sinclair rented a two-roomed flat in Kennington from where he could walk or cycle to work. Teresa, not unexpectedly, took it very badly, wept, became hysterical. Mothers and sisters from both sides of the family rallied round to support her and she eventually constructed in her mind a monster for a husband whom she was glad to be rid of.

This was the 'bad year or two' for which going to Delhi in May was to compensate. Sinclair would have kept such domestic friction and his lack of success in marriage hidden from his colleagues; Teresa at her most distracted and enraged had taken to telephoning the office to abuse him and to disabuse those around him of their belief in his integrity. The idea of Sinclair's 'hard time' and 'bad year' was general within the office, with an accompanying suspicion that he had, in fact, behaved rather badly to his wife.

Delhi, as Sinclair had rightly surmised, was by no means the light holiday task in pleasant surroundings that Anderson had implied at the briefing. For a start, the heat was tremendous. The sky was an open furnace from which, although it was often overcast, a shrivellingly hot breath came at all times of the day. The very morning of his arrival there had been a dust storm and the hot wind had acquired a fierce rasping edge which grazed the skin like sandpaper and filled the nose and mouth with grit.

What made it worse was that he had no suitable clothes. In his loosest trousers and with rolled up sleeves he sat in the air conditioning and vowed that tomorrow he would ask Jogiram to show him where to have some cotton shirts and trousers made.

Jogiram seemed to Sinclair the only source of help and information he was likely to find. Those representatives of the High Commission that he had met so far had treated him with a wary reserve, palpable even in their automatic welcoming rituals.

He had arrived very early in the morning and had been met at the airport by a man called Markham from the Administration Section of the High Commission who knew how to cope with the elaborate bureaucratic processes of the Indian customs service. Markham moved with assurance from one documentation check to the next, thrusting aside the other bewildered passengers from Sinclair's jumbo jet, until he released Sinclair into the blinding glare of the early morning city.

Sitting in the back of the High Commission Cortina Sinclair listened to the arrangements that had been made

for him.

"We've put you up in the Head of Chancery's bungalow in the compound," Markham told him. He saw a look of surprise on Sinclair's face and said, with a warning glance at the driver to prevent any comment, "We thought it would be useful for you to be on the spot, you know." Then, after another pause, "And, anyway, we've had instructions from London about not putting civil servants into hotels. They have to be accommodated by officers *en poste*. To save subsistence."

In the jerky explanation Sinclair could hear the curt sentences of the memo, probably headed: 'Accommodation of Visiting Members of the Civil Service Under Grade 4: Reduction of Subsistence' with ten numbered points to follow. He knew from his reading of the personnel file that the dead man was divorced and had no family living with him in Delhi, so such an arrangement would not intrude upon a widow. He would be alone.

"There's someone else staying there as well," Markham went on. "A woman called Jane Somers, an archaeologist I think she said. She was going to visit Hugo for a few days apparently. She arrived the morning he was…the day he…well, a few days ago. She has some work to do in India I believe. We've asked her to stay until you have seen her. She's been interviewed by the Indians of course."

"Can you tell me what the Indians have done so far?"

Markham again frowned at such lack of discretion in front of the driver.

"Bryan Lenton, the acting Head of Chancery, has asked to see you after the morning meeting. I'll take you over to see him. He'll be able to brief you on that side of things."

Sinclair could only put Markham's exceeding caution down to his horror of the Security Department and forbore to question him further. Markham volunteered no comment of his own until the car bumped over a railway bridge and was running along a straight, broad-verged avenue.

"Almost at the compound now," he informed the new arrival. "This is the diplomatic area round here. That's the Russians' over there. Ours is not so big, but very convenient: office, houses, swimming pool, hospital, club, all on one site."

Sinclair thought it sounded like a diplomatic Butlin's camp.

"You like compound life?"

"Oh, yes. It's very nice for the wives and kids. You feel safe," was the reply as they halted at a lowered barrier. A Gurkha, after peering inside to view the occupants of the car, saluted and allowed them in. "Or, at least, we did until this last week."

Markham went off to his breakfast after leaving Sinclair at the Head of Chancery's house in the charge of the bearer, a thin man in white shirt and trousers who had been waiting for them to arrive.

"I am Jogiram, Sahib. I show you your room." He set off up the stairs with Sinclair's bag. "That Frencham Sahib's room. That Miss Sahib's room. She sleep late; very late home last night. This your room, Sahib, and bathroom, please." He efficiently placed the case on a small rack ready to be opened and regarded the jet-lagged and crumpled Sinclair.

"I make breakfast. Tea, coffee for Sahib?"

"Oh, coffee, please. Thanks."

Sinclair showered and changed and went downstairs

to the dining-room where he was given Jogiram's idea of a good breakfast: sliced mango, bacon and scrambled eggs, toast and jam, coffee. The mango and coffee were superb, the toast flabby and inedible, the bacon and eggs reviving after the long flight. Jogiram cleared away the breakfast things and Sinclair, correcting his watch by the bracket clock on the bookcase in the drawing-room found that it was only half past eight.

Looking round the room he gave himself to estimating something of the late occupant from the furnishings. The carpets, covers, curtains were all a heavy and slightly unpleasant shade of blue; Sinclair knew these were standard government-provided items of a type laid down as suitable for the rank of counsellor and of a colour favoured by the clerk in charge of the properties. The solid, self-satisfied air of the chief pieces of furniture contrasted curiously with the ornaments which were many and fine. Sinclair was no judge of antiques and could not assess the quality of the late Hugo Frencham's *objets d'art*. He was, however, able to recognise the care with which each object was spaced in relation to others. The fact that some of them were damaged also spoke for their value.

On one wall was a long painting on cloth, the subject of which Sinclair was unable to understand. It seemed to be of a monster supporting a wheel with its jaws, hands and feet. The wheel was segmented and in each sector were scenes full of activity and torment. The picture was bordered with dark red silk, much frayed and torn, and was clamped between two sheets of glass, obviously to prevent further damage to the fabric.

Hugo Frencham had been interested in antiquities of many kinds: paintings, sculptures, bronzes, silver; so much was evident. He had been acquisitive; the room was

so full that the walls with their load of treasure appeared to lean in towards the visitor. There was a preciousness and self-consciousness in the arrangement of the objects which spoke of a man very aware of visual appearances and the power of impression on others. He must have had money. Private means? Making a mental note to look into Frencham's finances, Sinclair dozed until Markham arrived to escort him to the High Commission, a walk of a hundred yards or so.

Sinclair's meeting with the acting Head of Chancery clarified a number of things about the investigation that had been puzzling him. The death of a senior diplomat in violent and mysterious circumstances called for some kind of enquiry, but it might be assumed that, without further evidence of security breaches, a police investigation would be enough to clear the matter up. Indeed, the Foreign Office was usually extremely anxious to keep the Security Department from meddling in its affairs unless ministerial or public pressure for the Department's involvement was overwhelming. So why had Davey Simpson-Smith been so quick to call Security in? At least part of the answer, Sinclair soon established, lay with Bryan Lenton.

He was a youngish man, in his early thirties, with a forceful style of speech and a rancorous dislike of his late superior evident from his first sentences regretting his death. He was also charged with an excitement that Sinclair had often noticed in people peripherally caught up in security or police cases, a prurient interest in death and scandal where their own emotions of grief or fear were not aroused. Lenton shook hands with Sinclair across his desk and began to speak at once of his predecessor.

"He will be much missed here. A great tragedy. A real

old India hand, you know, steeped in the old ways. He was here during the War in the Indian Army and then stayed on for a year or two after Independence in '47, teaching at a school in the Hills or Kashmir, somewhere like that."

Sinclair registered the repeated 'old' and reinterpreted it as it was meant to be understood. Old Hugo had bored Bryan with stories of the Raj and had refused to adapt to the needs of diplomacy with an independent state.

"He was always going off to stay with old Army friends, mostly retired now and really not of much use as sources of political or military information. But he had a lot of contacts: Indians are amazingly hospitable, you know."

"He sounds the ideal diplomat for the country."

Lenton frowned judiciously, a pretence at being fair.

"Well, *de mortuis* etc but…" Sinclair waited for the dirt which he knew would follow. "It's all very well, you know, but this indiscriminate socialising needs to be coupled with some political flair for making sense of what you hear. Now that's what old Hugo lacked. He just wasn't interested in coming back from his trips with some ideas about how the Congress is doing in Uttar Pradesh for instance. More concerned with another piece of junk from a bazaar."

"What about in Delhi?" asked Sinclair. "Did he mix much here?"

"The usual thing—National Days and so on, not much more than that. Though, of course, he did see a lot of Dolgov, the Russian Counsellor."

"Oh yes?" Sinclair did not betray any special interest.

"Dolgov is our licensed Russian in Delhi, goes to all the Western cocktails. I don't know how or when he and Hugo became pally—I've only been here nine months—

but they certainly are, were. Used to play chess together; every month."

Sinclair changed tack. "Can I ask now about the police work that's been done so far? How much has gone on?"

"Indian police work, you know." (Sinclair knew little about either Indian police methods or diplomatic life but Lenton's reiterated 'you know' implied he knew everything and was one of the family.) "It's rather crude normally. They take in the witnesses and beat them until they confess to something; that's the usual technique. They've been very circumspect so far with this case. They've interviewed Hugo's servants and the Gurkhas on duty and Miss Somers. The weapon hasn't been discovered, as far as I know and, of course, no arrest has been made yet." A note of annoyance crept into Lenton's voice. "They didn't interview me. I wasn't anywhere around, of course; I live off the compound but… Well, perhaps it is better that you're here so that the more confidential background information can be given to you." He hesitated as if looking for encouragement; he received no more than a mildly questioning stare. "I feel I as acting Head of Chancery should be the person to put this to you. It may have a crucial bearing on your investigation. It's…boys."

The pause was a long one until Sinclair said, "Yes? What boys?"

"I'm not sure what boys or which boys as individuals. I'm just pretty sure that old Hugo was queer. And that may have something to do with what happened. Hugo had been divorced for a long time, you know," he went on without noticing the irrelevance, "and he was rather a pernickety old woman—all those damn bronzes

arranged just so."

Sinclair gathered the divorce and the bronzes were adduced as evidence of effeminacy and so of homosexuality. He could only hope that Lenton's political assessments were based on better foundations than his personal judgments.

"That kind of information could be significant," he said cautiously, "and I think it is probably better for me to hold it rather than the Indians at this stage, unless you have any knowledge of a particular boy being at the bungalow on the Monday night."

Lenton seemed relieved to have dropped his two hints and went on in more relaxed style, "I expect you'd like to talk to the police. I've been in touch and told them you're here and arranged a meeting for this afternoon. I'll have a car ordered for 2.15 to take you round there. It is an Inspector Battacharia who'll see you."

"I'll need to have a look round Frencham's office," said Sinclair, "and make a digest of papers and topics he had been working on in recent months. This is all routine. And I should like to send a message to London today."

At this list of requests Lenton looked sheepish, and started his reply with the last item.

"Sue, my secretary can type up anything you want sent. Now, Hugo's work," laughing, "making a list of that won't be too demanding a task. Sue can do that for you. I'll get Registry to help her. And the office—well—this is Hugo's office. My old one is a bit smaller and, in fact not so close to the High Commissioner." This line of argument seemed to please him and he elaborated it. "So it was better, you know to be a bit further up the corridor."

"I'd like to have a look around all the same," Sinclair repeated. "I always find it very revealing. Perhaps when you're at a meeting so I shan't inconvenience you. I'll bring my telegram over this afternoon when I go to see the police."

Sinclair sat at his typewriter and considered Bryan Lenton. He wondered whether anything the man had said could be believed. His display of dislike was so obvious that Sinclair was inclined to be sceptical of most of what he said. Lenton's intelligence had to be taken on trust as there was precious little evidence of it, except in efficient denigration of his late boss. So perhaps Anderson was going to be right. If the source of suspicion of Hugo Frencham was a subordinate's ambition and enmity there might be 'nothing in it' after all.

PURCHASE BOOK