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# The Case of the Missing Servant



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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurMeet Vish Puri, India's most private investigator. Portly, persistent and unmistakably Punjabi, he cuts a determined swathe through modern India's swindlers, cheats and murderers.In hot and dusty Delhi, where call centres and malls are changing the ancient fabric of Indian life, Puri's main work comes from screening prospective marriage partners, a job once the preserve of aunties and family priests. But when an honest public litigator is accused of murdering his maidservant, it takes all of Puri's resources to investigate. How will he trace the fate of the girl, known only as Mary, in a population of more than one billion? Who is taking pot shots at him and his prize chilli plants? And why is his widowed 'Mummy-ji' attempting to play sleuth when everyone knows Mummies are not detectives?With his team of undercover

operatives - Tubelight, Flush and Facecream - Puri ingeniously combines modern techniques with principles of detection established in India more than two thousand years ago -- long before 'that Johnny-come-lately' Sherlock Holmes donned his Deerstalker. The search for Mary takes him to the desert oasis of Jaipur and the remote mines of Jharkhand. From his well-heeled Gymkhana Club to the slums where the servant classes live, Puri's adventures reveal modern India in all its seething complexity.

Extrait One Vish Puri, founder and managing director of Most Private Investigators Ltd., sat alone in a room in a guesthouse in Defence Colony, south Delhi, devouring a dozen green chilli pakoras from a greasy takeaway box. Puri was supposed to be keeping off the fried foods and Indian desserts he so loved. Dr Mohan had intimated to him at his last check-up that he could no longer afford to indulge himself with the usual Punjabi staples. Blood pressure is up, so chance of heart attack and diabetes is there. Don't do obesity, he'd advised. Puri considered the doctor's stern warning as he sank his teeth into another hot, crispy pakora and his taste buds thrilled to the tang of salty batter, fiery chilli and the tangy red chutney in which he had drowned the illicit snack. He derived a perverse sense of satisfaction from defying Dr Mohan's orders. Still, the fifty-one-year-old detective shuddered to think what his wife would say if she found out he was eating between meals especially outside food that had not been prepared by her own hands (or at least by one of the servants). Keeping this in mind, he was careful not to get any incriminating grease spots on his clothes. And once he had finished his snack and disposed of the takeaway box, he washed the chutney off his hands and checked beneath his manicured nails and between his teeth for any tell-tale residue. Finally he popped some sonf into his mouth to freshen his breath. All the while, Puri kept an eye on the house across the way and the street below. By Delhi standards, it was a quiet and exceptionally clean residential street. Defence Colony's elitist, upper middle-class residences army officers, doctors, engineers, babus and the occasional press-wallah had ensured that their gated community remained free of industry, commerce and the usual human detritus. Residents could take a walk through the well-swept streets or idle in the communal gardens without fear of being hassled by disfigured beggars . . . or having to negotiate their way around arc welders soldering lengths of metal on the pavements . . . or halal butchers slaughtering chickens. Most of the families in Defence Colony were Punjabi and had arrived in New Delhi as refugees following the catastrophic partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. As their affluence and numbers had grown over the decades, they had built cubist cement villas surrounded by high perimeter walls and imposing wrought iron gates. Each of these mini-fiefdoms employed an entire company of servants. The residents of number 76, D Block, the house that Puri was watching, retained the services of no fewer than seven full-time people two drivers, a cook, a cleaner-cum-laundry-maid, a bearer and two security guards. Three of these employees were live-in and shared the barsaati on the roof. The overnight security guard slept in the sentry box positioned outside the front gate, though, strictly speaking, he really wasn't meant to. The family also relied on a part-time dishwasher, a sweeper, a gardener and the local pressing-wallah who had a stand under the neem tree down the street where he applied a heavy iron filled with hot coals to a dizzying assortment of garments, including silk saris, cotton salwars and denim jeans. From the vantage point in the room Puri had rented, he could see the dark-skinned cleaner-cum-laundry-maid on the roof of number 76, hanging underwear on the washing line. The mali was on the first-floor balcony watering the potted plants. The sweeper was using up gallons of precious water hosing down the marble forecourt. And, out in the street, the cook was inspecting the green chillis being sold by a local costermonger who pushed a wooden cart through the neighbourhood, periodically calling out, Subzi-wallah!

Puri had positioned two of his best undercover operatives, Tubelight and Flush, down in the street. These were not their real names, of course. Being Punjabi, the detective had nicknames for most of his employees, relatives and close friends. For example, he called his wife Rumpi; his new driver, Handbrake; and the office boy, who was extraordinarily lazy, Door Stop. Puri himself was known by various names. His father had always addressed him by his full name, Vishwas, which the detective had later shortened to Vish because it rhymes with wish (and Vish Puri could be taken to mean granter of wishes). But the rest of his family and friends knew him as Chubby, an affectionate rather than a derisive sobriquet although as Dr Mohan had pointed out so indelicately, he did need to lose about thirty pounds. Puri insisted on being called Boss by his employees, which helped remind them who was in charge. In India, it was important to keep a strong chain of command; people were used to hierarchy and they responded to authority. As he was fond of saying, You can't have every Johnny thinking he's a Nelson, no? The detective reached for his walkie-talkie and spoke into it. What's that Charlie up to, over? he said. Still doing timepass, Boss, replied Flush. There was a pause before he remembered to add the requisite over. Flush, who was thirty-two, skinny and wore thick, milk-bottle-bottom glasses, was sitting in the back of Puri's Hindustan Ambassador monitoring the bugs the team had

planted inside the targets home earlier, as well as all incoming and outgoing phone calls. Meanwhile, Tubelight, who was middle aged with henna-dyed hair and blind in one eye, was disguised as an autorickshaw-wallah in oily clothes and rubber chappals. Crouched on his haunches on the side of the street among a group of bidi-smoking local drivers, he was gambling at cards. Puri, a self-confessed master of disguise, had not changed into anything unusual for today's operation, though, seeing him for the first time, you might have been forgiven for thinking this was not the case. His military moustache, first grown when he was a recruit in the army, was waxed and curled at the ends. He was wearing one of his trademark tweed Sandown caps, imported from Bates of Jermyn Street in Piccadilly, and a pair of prescription aviator sunglasses. Now that it was November and the intense heat of summer had subsided, he had also opted for his new grey safari suit. It had been made for him, as all his shirts and suits were, by Mr M. A. Pathan of Connaught Place, whose grandfather had often dressed Muhammad Ali Jinnah, founder of Pakistan. A pukka Savile Row finish if ever I saw one, said the detective to himself, admiring the cut in a mirror in the empty room. Really tip top. The suit was indeed perfectly tailored for his short, tubby frame. The silver buttons with the stag emblems were especially fetching. Puri sat down in his canvas chair and waited. It was only a matter of time before Ramesh Goel made his move. Everything the detective had learned about the young man suggested that he would not be able to resist temptation. *Revue de presse* "Great fun a seething slice of the sub-continent." *The Times* "A clever and witty little story." *Globe and Mail* "The narrative tension brought to the tracking of the rogue is exquisitely riveting, climaxing in a movingly sorrowful scene. . . . [Tarquin's] readers will not regret one vicarious moment spent with the author on this trip." *Booklist* "The most original detective in years. Tarquin Hall has captured India in a way few Western writers have managed since Kipling. The country's humor, commotion and vibrancy bursts from every page, exposing its vast, labyrinthine underbelly. Scintillating!" Tahir Shah, author of *The Caliph's House*