

# A DISAPPEARANCE in Fiji

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**ALEXANDER  
McCALL SMITH**

**NILIMA RAO**

A  
DISAPPEARANCE  
in Fiji

NILIMA RAO

*echo*  
PUBLISHING

*For Aaji and Nani and those who came before them.*

## PRAISE FOR *A DISAPPEARANCE IN FIJI*

‘This is an utterly charming novel. The setting is exotic and the characters are intriguing. Nilima Rao is an author well worth discovering.’

—Alexander McCall Smith, bestselling author of the *No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* series

‘Meet Sergeant Akal Singh, the complex and charming hero of a thoroughly original mystery set in 1914 Fiji. Fans of Golden Age mysteries will relish this debut novel by a compelling new talent, Nilima Rao. More, please!’

—Sujata Massey, Agatha Award–winning author of *The Widows of Malabar Hill*

‘A poignant and entertaining read ... Sergeant Akal Singh is a charmingly imperfect and captivating protagonist. I love Akal and hope we’ll be seeing a lot more of him!’

—Ovidia Yu, author of the *Aunty Lee Singaporean Mysteries*

‘A marvellous debut that beautifully paints life in a part of the world that few of us have a chance to visit. The highlight of Nilima Rao’s well-crafted novel set in Fiji in the days of British colonial rule is the collision of cultures and class and how one man is charged with the task of unlocking the mysteries they create. A pleasure to read.’

—Colin Cotterill, author of the *Dr. Siri Paiboun Mysteries*

‘A gripping, authentic and brilliantly told mystery story that brings to life colonial era Fiji with a wealth of intriguing characters and underlying tensions. I have found a new favourite mystery series!’

—A.M. Stuart, author of the *Harriet Gordon Mysteries*

**THE FIJI TIMES,  
MONDAY, OCTOBER 5, 1914.**

**Chop Chop**

... No, no, Mr Editor. Mr Crompton, speaking at the 'Night Prowlers' meeting didn't say we want 'bodies', we've got quite enough 'busy' ones in Fiji, he said 'bobbies', good old common or garden peelers, Rogers, Cops or John Hops!



## CHAPTER ONE

‘The Night Prowler was out again last night.’

This portent of doom first thing in the morning made Sergeant Akal Singh once again forget to duck as he walked through the door of the Totogo Police Station in central Suva.

‘*Arre yaar,*’ he muttered with feeling. In the six months he had been in Fiji, Akal had knocked his head on that very door any number of times. It wasn’t a particularly low door, but his turban added inches to his already formidable height.

Akal smoothed his hands over the turban, cursing the lack of mirror in the sparsely furnished front room of the station, or indeed any of the police buildings. One had been ordered for the European officers’ barracks, but the ship from Sydney had been delayed. There was no talk of ordering one for the Indian and Fijian barracks.

‘Is my turban correct?’ he asked Taviti. The Fijian corporal was manning the front desk, and had been the one to deliver the news about Akal’s current nemesis.

‘Um, I think it’s alright, sir. I don’t know much about turbans.’

‘Is it straight? Is any hair falling out? Are there lumps and bumps?’

‘Yes, sir, straight, sir, no hair falling out, sir. Seems like a lot of work.’

Akal continued to smooth his hands over the sides of his turban, checking everything was in place despite Taviti’s reassurances. ‘It’s a bloody bugger in this heat, I tell you. But the ladies love it.’

He waited for Taviti to scoff at this, given the dearth of women in Akal’s life, but instead the Fijian man mirrored Akal, his hand running thoughtfully over his tight wiry curls. ‘You think I should try it?’

‘Do you think you can handle all the women?’

‘Probably not. But my wife could!’ Taviti shot back as he slapped the counter, resulting in a satisfyingly meaty echo throughout the room. Both men roared with laughter until they ran out of breath.

Akal had never in his life laughed as hard as he did with Taviti. No matter whether something was actually funny or not, Akal found himself convulsing in breathless spasms, Taviti’s laughter rolling over him, while not really knowing why. Still chuckling, Akal dropped down into the

spindly wooden visitor's chair and started to inspect the dust on his shoes.

Akal and Taviti's fledgling friendship was unique in the Suva police force. They were of an age, Akal twenty-five to Taviti's twenty-six, but many of their colleagues were a similar age so this alone didn't explain their rapport. There were other Indians in the police force and plenty of Fijians. The language barrier left them all at arm's distance, making themselves understood with a garbled mixture of English, Hindi and Fijian when they had to, but never really trusting one another.

Even without the language barrier, Akal had not broken through with any of the other Indian officers. None of them were Punjabi Sikhs, so they did not have the immediate bond of home and religion. In fact, they all regarded him with a mixture of resentment and contempt. They were constables to his sergeant, and they had not seen him earn his stripes, so they had no idea whether he was capable or not. Add to that the rumours about the reasons behind his abrupt departure from Hong Kong, and it was no wonder that they gave Akal a wide berth.

When Akal had disembarked from the ship that brought him from Hong Kong to Fiji six months ago, Taviti had been waiting for him, having been sent to collect Akal and take him to the police station. Taviti had approached Akal as he stood swaying on the dock, trying to adjust to solid ground. A few minutes into their walk to the station, Akal and Taviti had adjusted to their vastly different accents and discovered in each other a reasonable grasp of English. Taviti immediately started teasing Akal about his inability to walk a straight line, and their friendship had been quickly cemented.

'I cannot believe we have all started calling this bugger the "Night Prowler". Bloody *Fiji Times* and their stupid names,' Akal grumbled.

'What would you rather call him? He prowls around at night. Seems like a good name to me,' Taviti responded with a shrug.

'Whatever we call him, I need to find him, or I will never get a decent case again.'

'What do you mean, "again"?' Taviti said, cocking his head at Akal quizzically. 'You have not had a decent case since you got here. The inspector-general hated you on sight.'

'So, who was our wonderful Night Prowler bothering this time?' Akal said, focusing on his shoes and not making eye contact with Taviti. He had managed thus far to avoid explaining to Taviti the reasons he was in

disfavour with the inspector-general, and he hoped to keep it that way, though Taviti almost certainly had an inkling of the truth. Everyone in the colony talked to Taviti.

‘Too much to ask that they got a look at him, I suppose?’

‘No, usual story. It was the Wishbournes up on Knolly Street, you know, with the two daughters. Eleven o’clock. Mr Wishbourne was at the governor’s party. The Night Prowler was naked at the youngest girl’s window. She woke up and saw him, started screaming, and he bolted. By the time the mother arrived, all she saw was his behind bouncing down the hill. But she definitely could tell it was a black behind.’

‘Could she tell what kind of black?’

‘My kind, not your kind. A good round Fijian behind, not one of your scrawny Indian arses.’ Taviti flashed his teeth, each roughly the size of a small shovelhead. Akal was always astounded that Taviti managed to talk around all those teeth and mourned the day he would start losing them, as seemed to be the fate of all the older Fijian men.

‘I’m off to Knolly Street, then. Maybe he will have left us a clue this time. His calling card, perhaps?’ Akal looked up with a grin for Taviti, then jumped to his feet when he saw the inspector-general glowering at him from the door to the back rooms of the station.

‘Singh. My office.’ The inspector-general didn’t wait for a response, and disappeared back down the corridor, his footsteps echoing through the room. Akal hurried to follow him.

‘What did you do now?’ Taviti asked.

Akal shrugged and muttered as he passed Taviti: ‘I’m still breathing. I think that might be enough.’



Akal approached the door to the inspector-general’s office with some trepidation. He had been in this office only once before, when he had first arrived in the colony. As soon as he had walked in, it had become apparent to Akal just how far he had fallen. The concrete room with its grimy louvres was a hovel compared to his previous commander’s office in Hong Kong, which had been all high ceilings and polished wood. He had spent countless hours in that elegant space, consulting with his commander as his star rapidly rose with the British administration in Hong Kong. In his first meeting with Thurstrom, it had been made crystal clear that he would not



enjoy that same elevated status here.

The reception desk outside the inspector-general's office, which had been full of neatly piled stacks of paperwork on his last visit, was now bare. This had been the desk of Sub-Inspector Marks, who had left the colony a couple of months ago, causing much consternation. Against the wishes of the colonial administration, the young inspector had managed to secure a commission to serve in the war being waged in Europe, leaving Suva without a European sub-inspector and the inspector-general without his right-hand man.

Akal knocked on the open door of the inspector-general's office. Without looking up, the inspector-general waved him in.

Inspector-General Jonathon Thurstrom, head of the police force for the fledgling colony, was seated behind his large desk, which was littered with papers, as was every chair. He was an imposing man, tall and robust with a shock of greying red hair that illuminated the dim room. Akal stood to attention before the desk.

'Inspector-General, sir,' Akal rattled off with crisp precision, to no response.

Akal maintained his military bearing as Thurstrom continued to ignore him. The room was quiet but for the scratching of the inspector-general's pen and the sounds of the trainees learning how to march outside. Thurstrom finished with his piece of paperwork and put his pen down, finally focusing on Akal.

'Singh, I have a problem.' Thurstrom jabbed his finger in Akal's direction with vigour. 'And I am making it your problem.'

'Yes, Inspector-General, sir?' Akal rattled off again, with slightly less precision.

'We've got a missing coolie out at the Parkins plantation in Nakavu. A woman. We have taken a report, and the plan was that whoever goes out that way next would do the usual checks. But some busybody missionary has gone and told the newspaper that there is no way she ran away. Went out to print this morning.' He stood up and leaned over the table, brandishing a copy of the *Fiji Times* like a pace stick. 'He is saying she must have been kidnapped. It's a bloody mess. And the Indian delegation arrived yesterday.'

The vaguely named Delegation for India's Relations with Fiji was visiting to review the Indian indentured servitude program. Until now, nobody had

seemed overly concerned about this. The *Fiji Times*' reporting on the delegation had focused on who was attending the gala reception planned that night, and, crucially, what they would be wearing. The delegation's actual purpose had been relegated to a single sentence towards the end of the article.

'I've heard rumblings that the Indian government are keeping an eye out for situations like this,' Thurstrom continued, beginning to pace the office and slapping the newspaper into his hand. 'They want to see how we treat a crime against an indentured worker. I tried to get Keane involved to head off the political mess, but do you think he's paying any attention?'

David Keane was the agent-general of Immigration. He had arrived six months ago, having never laid eyes on an indentured worker before, and had since lived in an uneasy sort of ignorant bliss. He had done nothing thus far to investigate the abuses that were alleged to be rife against the Indian labourers, male and female. Akal had arrived on the same ship as David Keane and he also had yet to make it out to a plantation. This was something he was glad of, in a quiet, selfish corner of his heart.

'I wish there were somebody else I could send,' the inspector-general said, pausing mid-pace to give Akal a sideways glance. Akal gritted his teeth. 'But having a senior Indian officer involved might just get the Indian government off all our backs. Go see this idiot missionary and report back to me post-haste. Try to get him to calm down and see reason. If we can get him to stop screaming that she has been 'kidnapped' maybe this whole thing will go away.'

Akal hesitated before reluctantly raising the topic of his current unresolved, frustrating case.

'Sir, what about the Night Prowler investigation? I don't know if you have heard, but he struck again last night.'

'Hmmm ... the Night Prowler,' Thurstrom muttered, sitting heavily back down in his chair. 'Do you know what I think, Singh? We just should not have women in the colony. Bloody headache.'

'The Night Prowler targets children, sir.'

Thurstrom glared at him. 'Well, if there are no women there will be no children, will there, Singh? You do know how children are made, don't you?'

'Ah, yes, sir.' Akal tried not to squirm.

Thurstrom's glare turned even sharper. 'The Night Prowler investigation,

it hasn't been going well for you, has it, Singh? Haven't caught the bugger, have you?'

'No, sir.' Akal struggled to keep the resentment off his face but failed to keep it out of his voice. Thurstrom knew very well that he had not 'caught the bugger'.

'It seems my first impression of you was accurate.'

Akal could feel the warmth creeping up his neck. The Night Prowler had been peeping into the windows of the children of Suva for months before Akal had arrived. He had been handed the case with no description of the perpetrator, no pattern to the night-time excursions and no leads whatsoever.

In the six months since Akal's arrival into this backwater colony, the Night Prowler had made six more appearances. Akal's achievements to date had been to coax descriptions out of the children, something the previous investigators had not managed. Six different descriptions of six entirely different men, as far as he could tell. Frightened children did not make good witnesses. Thurstrom knew perfectly well how difficult the case was. After all, he had assigned the case to Akal to demonstrate how unwelcome he was in Thurstrom's police force.

Thurstrom leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers in front of him. 'This is an important case, Singh, and you are my only option. If I could send one of the Indian constables, I would, but then I'd be in hot water for sending a constable when a sergeant was available. Perhaps this is an opportunity for you to show me what you can do. Make this go away without upsetting the Indian government, and perhaps some other, more solvable cases will start coming your way.'

'Yes, sir,' Akal replied, working hard to keep his excitement down. He had been getting nowhere with the Night Prowler; at least this case might give him another chance to redeem himself.

'Now, get moving. Oh, and go see Mrs Parkins as well, see if she knows anything about this coolie woman. We have been trying to call Henry Parkins on the telephone out at the plantation, but nobody has answered. Go carefully with her, though. Her father is an important man in Australia.'

Akal had never met Susan Parkins, but had seen her around Suva. Despite his short tenure in Fiji, Akal already knew all the Europeans on sight. Another reason to miss Hong Kong. 'Yes, sir!' Akal saluted and smartly marched out of the office. Back downstairs, he collected a copy of the

newspaper from Taviti and they spread the paper over the counter, turban and wiry curls almost colliding as they leaned over to read the small print.

### **Coolie Kidnap**

#### **Planter calls it Run Away, Missionary calls it Kidnap!**

A coolie has disappeared, this time a female on the Nabanigei plantation in Nasinu. The woman, named Kunti, was last seen two days ago when she reported sick from work and stayed in the coolie line for the day. It was reported by Mr Parkins, the plantation proprietor, that she had run away. However Father David Hughes, a Catholic missionary, has come directly to the *Fiji Times*, alleging she must have been kidnapped!

‘Run away, rubbish,’ the good missionary has told us. ‘I have met this young lady a few times and she would never run away and leave her daughter behind. If she has gone, it is against her will.’

A mystery is afoot! As reported in this newspaper two weeks ago, the high rate of coolie suicides has sparked outrage in India. How will the Indian government respond to this latest situation? Could we see an end to the indentured system anon? In the face of all this interest from India and from our planters here, what will our worthy colonial administration do?

Taviti frowned. ‘That seems weak. Some missionary met the woman a few times and thinks she wouldn’t run away. And this is the case the inspector-general is worried about?’

Akal nodded. Whether the woman had run away or had indeed been kidnapped, however unlikely, if the colonial administration were seen not to investigate, a whole new cause would be created to add to the pressure for the end of the indenture system. The end of the indenture system would likely lead to the end of the sugar plantations, which were the backbone of the economy of the colony.

‘I suppose I’d better go find out what the good Father has to say.’

‘Looks like you are going to church,’ Taviti said with a grin.



The walk from the station to the Sacred Heart Cathedral was all uphill and distinctly lacking in shade. The saving grace was that it was mercifully short. Despite this, by the time Akal was standing on the steps of the grey stone church, he was a sweaty mess. Standing in the shadow cast by the spire, Akal stopped to take a closer look at the church. It was an impressive building. The stone, brought over from Australia, provided a feeling of permanence that the wooden buildings which were the standard in Suva could not match. But even this solid edifice wasn't impervious to the environment. The steps were mossy in places, with grass growing out of any available crack.

Akal held his sticky shirt away from his body and fanned his face with his free hand, trying to cool down the flush blooming all over his face. A trickle of sweat escaped his turban and ran down his back. Akal would not dream of attending the *gurdwara*, the Sikh temple, in such a sweaty mess, and the thought of entering a Christian church this way felt equally disrespectful. He wiped his forehead and flicked the perspiration off his hand in disgust. Nothing to be done about it. Perhaps Father Hughes would overlook his dishevelled state. He must be used to it, after all.

As soon as Akal walked through the stately wooden door of the Sacred Heart Cathedral, he felt a sense of calming, cooling peace. When the door closed behind him, the room was quiet, far away from the dirt and noise and heat of Suva. The only sound was a rhythmic sweeping, gently echoing up to the high wooden ceiling. Akal paused at the first pew and closed his eyes, absorbing the serenity.

He hadn't been to a *gurdwara* since Hong Kong, and even then he was never at the temple on his own. Akal was used to religious places being of colour and noise, drumming and movement. Of the ghee and sugar in the desserts offered to *Waheguru*, to God. Of feeling immersed, overwhelmed by the presence of *Waheguru*. It was a very communal thing, worshipping at the temple. He always left with a deep sense of connection, not only to *Waheguru* but to everyone he worshipped with.

This was different. This was sweetly, piercingly peaceful but a little lonely. Akal had glimpses of the English God here, but he thought if he wanted to know Him, he would have to work for it. He wondered if it would be different if he attended a service. Would he even be welcome?

'Can I help you?'

Akal's reverie was broken by this enquiry, made in a suspicious voice. He

looked around to find a tiny woman with a mop of curly blonde hair. She was looking at him with an air of puzzlement and clutching a broom.

‘Can I help you?’ she repeated, a little louder and slower this time.

‘I am looking for Father David Hughes.’ Akal, fighting the urge to respond in kind, replied at his regular speed and volume.

‘A policeman,’ the diminutive woman said, relaxing her grip on the broom. ‘You will be here about the Indian woman. Father Hughes will be pleased.’ She turned towards the door and gestured for Akal to follow her. ‘Please do help him. He has not stopped talking about this. I need him to focus on his sermon for next Sunday.’

Akal followed her a little reluctantly to another door at the side of the church. He hesitated at the doorway, taking a long breath, trying to instil the sanctity of the place deep within his body. This peaceful state fled when the woman popped her head back inside the door, urging him along. Akal emerged from the cool haven into a small garden, blinking in the blinding sunlight.

When his eyes adjusted, Akal found the priest kneeling in a small vegetable garden and muttering to himself while vigorously digging out weeds from between rows of carrots. The weeds seemed to be winning the war, while the carrot tops languished in a torpor with which Akal could sympathise. Father Hughes was, as promised, exceptionally pleased to see him.

‘Yes, yes, hello,’ Father Hughes exclaimed, leaping up and offering Akal his hand, still clad in a dirt-covered glove.

When Akal hesitated, the priest looked down and snatched his hand back, grabbing the glove off his hand before offering the hand again.

‘Good to meet you, wonderful,’ Father Hughes said, pumping Akal’s hand and not letting him get a word in edgewise. ‘Come in, this way, let me get you some tea. Hetty!’

In a flurry, Akal was ushered up the garden path and into the sitting room of a modest residence on the church grounds. The priest all but pushed him into a seat before disappearing off to procure the promised refreshments. In Akal’s short time in the colony, nobody else – European, Indian, Fijian alike – had offered him a simple cup of tea. The Europeans always wanted a European officer and the Indians resented him for not being more like them. The warmest reception he got was from the Fijians, who seemed to consider him, with his turban and his police uniform, a curiosity. This was a



welcome change.

Akal sat for a few minutes, drumming his fingers on the arm of the chair, before standing to look around the small, sparsely furnished sitting room. The room had a lived-in feel to it, floorboards polished by decades of familiar footsteps. Akal stopped in front of a picture of Jesus, the Christian holy man he had heard much about. Jesus was holding his heart in his hands, hands which were faded by time, with rays of light escaping through the fingers. He seemed to be looking at Akal with a compassion and wisdom that was both comforting and eerie. Akal turned his back to the picture and hastily returned to the sturdy wicker chairs.

Akal sat back down in one of them and immediately stood again, removing the lumpy cushion. There was a proverb stitched into it in blue cotton, frayed strands draping limply across the coarse beige linen. *Give, and it shall be given unto you; Luke 6:38.* He was contemplating this adage, cushion in hand, when Father Hughes returned.

Akal rushed his introduction in before the priest could open his mouth, concerned that he might never get the opportunity otherwise. 'Father, I am Sergeant Akal Singh of the Fijian Constabulary, Suva Division.'

'Of course, yes, very pleased to meet you,' Father Hughes replied. 'Please take a seat. Hetty is bringing tea.'

Akal sat once more, moving the cushion out of the way.

'So, *somebody* is paying some attention. Who sent you? The governor?' the priest asked, triumph evident in each word.

'No, Father, Inspector-General Thurstrom sent me.'

'That will do, I suppose. I had hoped to get the governor's attention.'

'Well, yes, you certainly did get his attention. This has become extremely sensitive ...' Akal paused for emphasis. 'As you went to the newspaper rather than the police.'

The priest glared at him in disbelief. 'I *did* go to the police first. All you did was call Henry Parkins and accept his story that she had run away. That is when I went to the newspaper. This way you could not just ignore it.'

Father Hughes had stoked the political fires and now it was up to Akal to put them out with a thimbleful of water while trying not to get too severely burnt himself. He had not heard that the priest had initially approached the police with his concerns, but it did not surprise him that those concerns were ignored, given the dismissive way the inspector-general had spoken about the case.

‘Please tell me what you know of the alleged victim.’

‘Kunti. Her name was Kunti.’

Father Hughes looked at Akal, eyebrows raised. He waited. Akal realised the priest was not going to continue until he acknowledged her name. What difference her name made to Father Hughes, Akal did not know.

‘Yes. Kunti.’

The priest’s narrowed eyes caused a cascade of wrinkles to appear across his face. ‘Just ... wait here a moment please, Sergeant.’

Father Hughes went into another room while Akal waited, his right knee starting to restlessly bounce up and down. Meanwhile, Hetty, the woman who had been sweeping in the church, arrived with the tea.

‘Chewing your ear off, I suppose?’ she said with a wry smile, as she put the tray down and poured both cups full of strong milky tea.

Akal looked at her blankly.

‘Going on about the coolies,’ she clarified. ‘He has responsibilities here in Suva, you know, but no, he is always gallivanting around the country.’ She tutted as she handed Akal his cup and passed the sugar bowl.

Father Hughes returned holding an album before she could elaborate. Hetty gave the priest his cup of tea and bustled out, admonishing him to not take too long and to remember his unfinished sermon. Father Hughes waved her away. He balanced the album on his knees and flipped the thick brown cardboard pages, stopping about halfway through. He turned the book around to show Akal a black-and-white photograph of an Indian woman.

‘This is Kunti. She is a real person, Sergeant Singh.’

‘Yes, sir.’ Akal kept his tone respectful, though he thought perhaps his one eyebrow creeping towards his turban may have negated the effect. He reached out and took the album for a closer look.

The photograph was of Kunti’s head and shoulders, sari draped over her hair. Elongated eyes tipped up at the ends dominated her face, drawing him in. She was not actually smiling, but there was something about her eyes which spoke of joy. It certainly did not look as though Kunti was imminently running away, though what that might look like Akal didn’t know.

‘How did you get this photograph?’

‘I took it the first time I met Kunti, at the plantation. I was travelling around the colony, gathering information for my report for the Church. I’m

trying to show how the terrible conditions the Indians are living in are resulting in their moral decline. The Church is deciding on its position on the indentured servitude program, and when the bishops see my report, I think the conclusion will be unavoidable. The situation on the plantations is an indictment of the indenture system, and it is incumbent on all good Christians to – ’

‘You said you met Kunti on the plantation?’ Akal interrupted, putting his hand up to stem the torrent of words. The priest started and then nodded, climbing down from atop his soapbox and back to the present.

‘Hmm, yes. It was towards the end of my trip; the Parkins plantation was one of my last stops. I was tired, a little numb. The visit started with the usual hostile conversation with Henry Parkins. “What’s the problem?” he said. “They all signed their contracts.” *Hmph*. Put their thumbprints on a contract they could not even read, more like. They were told all sorts of stories. Do you know, one of the common lies was that Fiji was just south of Calcutta! Told that the work was easy when really the daily “task” defined in the contract was only achievable by the strongest. Never told that if they didn’t complete the full task in a day, that day didn’t count towards the contract. Never knowing that they had sold themselves into slavery for five years.’

Akal had heard some of these claims before, but he had never known how much to believe. Father Hughes’s passionate recital gave him the uneasy sense that perhaps he should have paid more attention in the past. He rubbed his forehead and said, resigned, ‘Yes, sir. Please continue.’

The priest took a deep breath, chest swelling in his fervour. ‘None of the plantation owners want reform of the system. They are all much more concerned about the state of their pockets than the state of their souls, you see. None of them are happy to see me. But Parkins knew better than to bar me from the plantation altogether. He would have, if he thought he could get away with it. But the man has some political ambitions, and he wants to stay on the right side of the Church.’

He waved his finger at Akal and nodded with grim satisfaction. ‘After reminding Parkins of his Christian duty, I went to visit some of the women where they were working. They were removing weeds from a field of young sugar cane. They were spread out across the field and they couldn’t stop working, of course, so I was walking from one to the next, seeing if anybody would talk to me.’

‘Do they speak English?’ Akal asked, surprised. The people desperate enough to sign the *girmit*, the indentured servitude contract, were the poorest of the poor.

‘No, of course not. I speak enough Hindi to communicate simple things. The thing is, even if nobody will speak to me, I can learn enough just by observing. They were a sad looking bunch. One woman had her baby with her, and the baby started crying at one point. It was pitiful, Sergeant, even the cry sounded thin. As usual, the women were reluctant to speak to me, so I went down to the coolie line to see what the conditions there were like. Have you seen a coolie line before, Sergeant Singh?’

Akal shook his head. What he’d heard of the accommodations provided to the indentured servants had given him a fair idea that he didn’t want to spend any time there. A sentiment Akal didn’t want to share with this crusading clergyman.

‘Well, this one was about average, which is to say it was a dire place. Parkins has followed the regulations to the letter and not a single thing more. The rooms are exactly the minimum size allowed, scarcely enough to swing a cat. The internal walls run to the mandated height and use chicken wire at the top for ventilation, which means that there is no privacy whatsoever. Families in a room with singles right next door. How is anyone supposed to maintain a moral family life in these conditions? My report – ’

‘And Kunti?’ Akal prompted.

‘Yes, yes, Kunti, of course. So, there I was, too tired to be angry about the state of the coolie line, frustrated that nobody would speak to me. I was having a very low moment – until I walked around the corner and there she was. Kunti. It was like the sun came out. She was shy, but not scared like the other women. I asked her if she would sit for this photograph, through gesture, of course, and she nodded. I took the photograph and left. A few months later I came back through and gave her a copy.’

‘And you say that was a few months ago?’ Akal asked. ‘Do you think she may have just worn down and run away?’

Father Hughes did not even consider the possibility. ‘No, no, no. Impossible. She was three years into her contract. Why would she suddenly wear down now, unless something happened? But I can’t imagine what would be so dreadful that she’d leave her daughter. No, I stand by my statement – if she has disappeared, it is against her will.’

‘Sir, with respect, this doesn’t seem enough to call it a kidnapping. We

don't know what has happened to this woman since you saw her.'

The priest seemed truly taken aback for the first time in the conversation. 'It would be exceedingly foolish to ignore this,' he warned, as if surprised at Akal's matter-of-fact demeanour. 'The Indian people will demand justice, here and in India.'

'I will report your concerns to the inspector-general,' Akal reassured him, inching forward in his chair, eager to depart.

'When you do, make sure he understands that I won't be quiet about this. The church will continue to fight for justice for Kunti.' Father Hughes took a deep breath, visibly calming himself, then proceeded in a less threatening tone: 'Sergeant Singh, please tell me that you care enough to find out the truth, even if she has run away. I know that to the planters and to the administration, these Indians are beasts of burden more than people. But for you, Kunti is your countrywoman.'

'I'll do what I can, sir,' Akal responded in a clipped tone. The priest's words had him a little restless, perhaps even a little angry. He did not want to look too deeply at the problems in the *girmit* scheme. What did Father Hughes think Akal could do about any of it? He had not created the situation, and it had nothing to do with him, really. The Indians being brought over as *girmityas* were not the kind he would have ever dealt with in India. They were not his people, even if they were his countrymen.



Akal's second interview for the day was with Mrs Henry Parkins. The Parkins house was on Cakobau Road, alongside the homes of all the other well-heeled plantation owners. Akal and Taviti slogged their way up the hill, walking past the newly reorganised Suva Botanical Gardens, where the cicadas sang of their love of the sun.

'Watch out,' Taviti said, putting a hand out to steer Akal around a small crater in the road that Akal had missed while he was looking longingly at the cooling green of the gardens, which provided a lush counterpoint to the dusty road.

'These bloody potholes,' Akal grumbled.

'You just have to learn to walk properly. Wouldn't want you to snap your chicken legs.'

Akal shot him a sideways glare, always sensitive about his gangly legs, and said, 'Remind me why I asked you to join me for this interview?'

Taviti chuckled but wisely stopped his teasing at this reminder of the opportunity Akal had given him.

Akal had stopped back at the station after the visit with the priest, and asked Taviti to join him while he questioned Mrs Parkins. He had had no problem interviewing a clergyman on his own, but with a European lady, he preferred to have a witness. Taviti had leapt at the opportunity.

‘Why are they so big?’ Akal asked, swerving to avoid a rather large example of what he was complaining about. ‘I walked up here two days ago, but I am sure the potholes have gotten worse.’

Taviti shrugged. ‘It rains every day. The rain comes down the hill and takes half the road with it. You think you have it bad? Think of the cyclists.’

What remained of the road following the afternoon rain was often a sodden mire in which cyclists got stuck and had to dismount, with varying levels of grace but consistent degrees of irritation. Sometimes the potholes joined forces and grew big enough to swallow a cyclist whole.

‘Seriously, thank you for bringing me along,’ Taviti said, ducking his head down and looking at the road. ‘I really want to learn.’

Akal looked at his friend with sympathy. Despite the inspector-general’s low regard for Akal, at least he was assigned real cases, albeit painful ones. Taviti had so much that Akal didn’t – a wife and children, a position in Fijian society – but those very things were putting something Taviti craved out of his reach: to truly maintain law and order in Fiji. Akal was determined to help him where he could.

‘Well, you can start earning your keep. What do you know about Mrs Parkins?’

‘I have met her a few times at parties. She is invited to everything.’

‘So are you,’ Akal shot back with a sly half-smile.

‘That is different. I have to go, to represent my uncle.’

Taviti was the nephew of a prominent chief who lived too far away from Suva to regularly attend the important social events of the colony. As far as his family were concerned, Taviti’s true purpose in Suva was to represent the clan. Policing was something Taviti did over his family’s objections.

‘She is going to all of these events to drum up support for her husband,’ Taviti continued. ‘He is running for chairman of the Planters’ Association in a couple of months.’

‘Planters’ Association? That will make him one of the most powerful men in the colony,’ Akal moaned. ‘And I have to investigate his runaway coolie.’



The Planters' Association represented the plantation owners' interests and was the only body which tried to stand up to Colonial Sugar Refining, the Australian company that bought all the cane in Fiji. CSR was both the biggest contributor to the Fijian economy and the biggest bully.

'If it helps, I've heard it is really her who will end up running the association. He's not that interested.'

'If he isn't interested, why is he running for chairman?'

'I've only got rumours,' Taviti said, giving Akal a questioning look. On Akal's nod, he continued. 'From what I hear, Susan Parkins comes from a political family in Australia. An only child, so her parents did not have a son to carry on the family traditions in politics. Henry Parkins comes from money. Their parents arranged their meeting. They were supposed to be a powerful force in Sydney – and he was supposed to be climbing the political ladder there. But somehow, they ended up in Fiji.'

'She was not happy when she first got here. Turned her nose up at all of the social events, wouldn't talk to the other planters' wives. Until the Planters' Association election came up. Now she's suddenly charming everyone in Suva: the planters, their wives, the administration. Meanwhile, Henry Parkins never leaves his plantation. So, everyone knows that if he is elected, she will be running the show. But the planters are happy with that. They are hoping her family's influence will help when they are negotiating with CSR.'

They reached the Parkins house towards the top of the hill. It was a typical house for well-to-do Europeans in the colony. Wooden and raised on stilts, it was designed to make the most of the breeze that flowed over the top of the hill. The front garden was in full bloom, festooned with flowers. The family must have a Fijian gardener, Akal thought. It was cared for but not ruthlessly tamed, like some of the others on the street.

He brushed past a row of hibiscus bushes, causing the blooms with their wide red petals to wave their improbably large stamens at him indignantly. The bougainvillea got into the act, its spindly branches heavily burdened with clusters of deep purple triangles swaying in the light breeze and breaking away to dust his shoulders with gossamer petals.

The front of the house boasted a wide verandah, with four wooden chairs arranged around a matching table, a perfect spot for sipping gin and tonics as the sun went down over the Pacific Ocean. Akal and Taviti proceeded up the shallow wooden steps leading up to the verandah and knocked on the

front door. Taviti charmed the shy house girl who answered the door into fetching her mistress for them.

When Susan Parkins arrived, opening the door just enough so that she could see him, and he could see her, the bottom fell out of Akal's stomach. He felt as though he had been transported back to Hong Kong, to another small, blonde woman who had turned his life upside down. He stared at her in a reverie until she snapped him back to the here and now by speaking.

'Yes?'

Akal blinked rapidly and squared his shoulders, putting the past behind him, at least for the moment. 'I am Sergeant Akal Singh of the Fijian Constabulary, Suva Division. Are you Mrs Henry Parkins?'

'Yes.' She arched an elegant brow at him.

'May I come in?'

She frowned. 'What is this about?'

They stood at an impasse for a moment, before she brusquely said, 'You can ask me your questions outside.'

She yanked the door open, and Akal got a glimpse into the front room of the house. The room was elegantly appointed with furniture that must have come in on ships from elsewhere in the British Empire. Wooden shutters had been propped open at the many windows and the morning light flooded through the room. That was all he saw before the door was abruptly slammed shut in his face.

When she stepped out onto the verandah, Mrs Parkins's delicate appearance was incongruous with her actions. She was slight and small, the top of her head well below Akal's shoulder. A fluttery floral dress and blonde curls elegantly pinned up completed the picture of a genteel lady. She did not appear to have the strength to slam the door shut with sufficient force to make the house shudder, and yet she just had.

Then there was the narrow-eyed glare she gave Akal. He could feel the heat of her anger directed towards him, and he was puzzled by it. Irritation, disdain, even discomfort he would have accepted without question. These were not unusual reactions from a European woman when dealing with an Indian police officer, and he had learned to suppress his feelings at these reactions. In Hong Kong, it had been easier. There, he was valued by his superiors and his peers. Here, with no external validation, he was struggling to rise above the everyday bumps and bruises of being an Indian officer within the Raj. Nonetheless, Mrs Parkins's outright anger did not make

sense. Akal wondered if she knew why he was there.

When she saw Taviti, Susan Parkins's demeanour changed entirely, the glare replaced with a welcoming smile. So that was how it was, Akal thought. It wasn't about the colour of his skin – not entirely, anyway. It was that he had no power here, whereas Taviti had influence through his uncle. Akal didn't know whether that made it better or worse. He watched as she approached Taviti, ignoring Akal altogether.

'Is that you, Taviti?'

'Yes, ma'am,' Taviti responded, stepping forward with a respectful nod of his head.

'And in uniform. I forgot that you also dabble in police work.'

'I am a constable, ma'am,' Taviti replied evenly.

'I saw your uncle at the Christmas ball. He did not seem pleased about your "career",' she replied with a smirk.

'Did you know that your husband has reported that one of your coolie women has run away?' Akal asked, intervening before she could needle Taviti further.

Mrs Parkins stiffened again. She walked slowly away from the door towards the right side of the verandah, going to stand behind a wooden chair and putting all the furniture between them. Akal did not move, allowing her the space that she seemed to need.

'I do not get involved in the operations at the plantation,' she eventually replied, with a sniff. 'I take care of our affairs in Suva.'

'Her name was Kunti. Can you tell me anything about her?'

Mrs Parkins laughed at this. 'Why would I know the coolies on the plantation by name? Don't be ridiculous.'

'So, you have no information about when she ran away?'

'My husband mentioned something about our overseer, Brown, taking a coolie woman with him when he left. Perhaps it was her.'

'Why would he take Kunti?' Akal asked.

'They were probably having an affair. These coolie women all do it. I think they are trying to get out of work. Morals of alley cats.'

'Where would they go?' Akal asked in clipped tones.

'Well, Brown said he had secured a commission with the British Army and he was leaving for the war in Europe. The coolie woman disappeared when he left. My husband and I drew our own conclusions. Who knows where he actually went, though. I can't imagine the army would want him

with a slatternly low-caste Indian woman in tow.'

The ensuing silence on the verandah was broken only by the distant sound of the cicadas and the creaking of the nearby coconut palm as it languorously swayed in the breeze. Akal struggled to hold back a retort, suppressing a desire to defend the woman whose photograph he had seen just that morning. This was an unexpected and unwanted change in attitude. He cursed Father Hughes for making this case more personal. Taviti hesitantly stepped forward.

'So, ah, you don't know where Mr Brown is?' Taviti asked, his usual booming voice quiet in the tense little bubble they had formed on the verandah.

'No idea. On a ship? Fighting in Europe?' Mrs Parkins suggested dispassionately, as though she was speculating on the field positions of a cricket match. Despite her nonchalant tone, she was holding onto the back of the chair, her knuckles showing white.

'And you believe she ran away?' Taviti asked, his voice getting louder as he found his footing.

Mrs Parkins gave a short nod.

'Have you seen the newspaper this morning?' Akal said and turned to Taviti, who passed him the newspaper. He tried to hand it to her, the headline regarding the priest's allegations face-up. Mrs Parkins kept her arms crossed and her eyes slid away from the article. Akal lowered the paper.

'Again ... I do not know anything about this.'

Akal mentally raised an eyebrow at the steel in her voice, but his face remained impassive. 'You don't know why Father Hughes has alleged that she was kidnapped?'

She huffed again. 'Father Hughes. What a nuisance. He is trying to make a name for himself, I think. I am really not sure why he has made this his crusade. I mean, how many runaway coolie women are there in the colony?'

'Yours is the only one that has been reported, madam.'

Akal regarded the newspaper for a minute, allowing the uncomfortable silence to lengthen. When he looked back at Mrs Parkins, she was looking away, arms still crossed.

'Do you know if the telephone to the plantation is working? We have been unable to reach your husband to clarify some of these details.'

‘I spoke with him yesterday on the telephone. He called me. It was late. He often works late, especially since Brown left.’

‘Can you remember the time your husband called yesterday?’ he asked. ‘It is important that we speak with him.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. I told you it was late,’ she said dismissively. ‘Look, I don’t know anything more, and I really must be getting on with my day. I’ve got to get ready for the gala tonight.’

Mrs Parkins paused at the doorway and, without looking back, said, ‘Tell the inspector-general that if there are any other questions, he can ask me himself. He should not send his coolie officer to this house.’

**THE FIJI TIMES,  
MONDAY, OCTOBER 5, 1914.**

**Wedding Bells**

**Swinbourne-Wishart**

... The bride was given away by her father and looked very pretty in a beautiful dress of white chiffon satin draped skirt with fish-tail train and bodice of honiton lace over chiffon tulle. She also wore the conventional veil and orange blossom and carried an exquisite bridal bouquet.