

ARLO BATES

MR. JACOBS: A TALE OF
THE DRUMMER, THE
REPORTER, AND THE
PRESTIDIGITATEUR

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**Mr. Jacobs: A Tale of the
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and the Prestidigitateur**

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CHAPTER I

In spite of Jean-Jacques and his school, men are not everywhere, especially in countries where excessive liberty or excessive tiffin favors the growth of that class of adventurers most usually designated as drummers, or by a still more potent servility, the ruthless predatory instinct of certain bold and unscrupulous persons may and almost certainly will; and in those more numerous and certainly more happy countries where the travelling show is discouraged, the unwearied flatterer, patient under abstemious high-feeding, will assuredly become a roving sleight-of-hand man.

Without doubt the Eastern portion of the world, when an hereditary, or, at least, a traditional, if not customary, or, perhaps, conservative, not to say legendary, or, more correctly speaking, historic, despotism has never ceased to ingrain the blood of Russia, Chinese, Ottoman, Persia, India, British, or

Nantasket, in a perfect instance of a ruthless military tiffin, where neither blood nor stratagem have been spared.¹

I was at tiffin. A man sat opposite whose servant brought him water in a large goblet cut from a single emerald. I observed him closely. A water-drinker is always a phenomenon to me; but a water-drinker who did the thing so artistically, and could swallow the fluid without wincing, was such a manifestation as I had never seen.

I contrasted him with our neighbors at the lunch-counter, who seemed to be vying, like the captives of Circe, to ascertain by trial who could swallow the most free lunch, and pay for the fewest "pegs," – those vile concoctions of spirits, ice, and soda-water, which have destroyed so many splendid resolutions on the part of the Temperance Alliance, – and an impression came over me that he must be the most innocent man on the road.

Before I go farther let me try and describe him. His peculiarity was that, instead of eyes, he had jewels composed of six precious stones. There was a depth of life and vital light in them that told of the pent-up force of a hundred, or, at least, of ninety-nine generations of Persian magi. They blazed with the splendor of a god-like nature, needing neither tiffin nor brandy and soda to feed their power.

My mind was made up. I addressed him in Gaelic. To my surprise, and somewhat to my confusion, he answered in two

¹ The editor was here obliged to omit a score of pages, in which the only thing worth preserving was a carcanet of sulphur springs.

words of modern Hebrew. We fell into a polyglot but refined conversation.

"Come and smoke," he said, at length.

Slipping into the office of the hotel, and ascertaining that there was no danger, I followed to his room.

"I am known as Mr. Jacobs," he said. "My lawful name is Abdallah Hafiz-ben-butler-Jacobi."

The apartment, I soon saw, was small, – for India at least, – and every available space, nook, and cranny, were filled with innumerable show-cases of Attleboro' jewelry.

"Pretty showy?" he remarked familiarly. "I am a drummer."

"My name is Peter Briggs," I replied. "I am a correspondent of the *Calcutta Jackal*."

"My star!" he said. "That is the dog-star. A sudden thought strikes me," he added. "Let us swear an eternal friendship."

He thereupon told me his entire history, from childhood up. It was interesting to the last degree, as I had thought often before, when I read it in various dime novels.

He ceased speaking, and the waning moon rose pathetically, with a curiously doleful look, expressive of quiet, but deep contempt.

CHAPTER II

The next morning I had tiffin.

I speculated in regard to Mr. Jacobs. A long and eventful experience with three-card monte men had made me extremely shy of persons who begin an acquaintance by making confidences; and I wondered why he had taken the trouble to make up the story of his life, to relate to an entire stranger. Still, there was something about the man that seemed to promise an item for the *Calcutta Jackal*, and therefore, when Jacobs appeared, looking like the sunflower, for all his wild dress and his knee-breeches, I felt the "little thrill of pleasure," so aptly compared by Swinburne to the clutch of a hand in the hair.

"Are you married?" queried Mr. Jacobs.

"Thank heavens, no!" I replied, convulsively. "Are you?"

"Some," returned he, gloomily. "I have three. They do not agree. Do you think a fourth wife would calm them?"

"A man," I observed, sententiously, "is better off with no wife at all than with three."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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