

TOM BRIMS'S INDIAN PRINCES.

(From Chambers Journal.)

'I have been expecting them to want to buy a Cunard steamer or two, or some other trifle of that kind, since they have been here,' he bitterly said, in a talk with me on the second day. 'Luckily, ships are the only specialty there is in this place. But we shall be in money difficulties before we get away. Some diamonds ought to have been cashed before we left London. The treasurer has no money left in his bag. I told you they are like big children. It is of no more use trying to make them understand business than it would be trying to leap over the Mersey. Because I said last night the accounts must be paid, for some of them were coming in twice and three times over, the old one's moustache went up to his eyebrows. I expected he would have run an attendant or two through on the spot. But I mean to return to it this evening, if he kills every one of them.' He added that he should tell all three of them that it was the first time accounts for hundreds and thousands of pounds had had to be sent into him over again—which was no doubt true.

I begged him not to be rash. He said he did not mean to be, but he would not lose his character for punctuality of payment for all the princes in India. It was delightful to hear him talk; he preached a lay sermon on prompt settlements. It might entail some loss, he said, to sell diamonds in Liverpool, London being the right market; but that was their bad management, not his.

That night a critical scene took place. I had been formally introduced to their Highnesses in Yorkshire—that is to say, Tom presented me, and they had each looked me through with their dark eyes, not one of them uttering a word on the occasion. Understanding no syllable of their language, direct communication with them by me was out of the question; in fact, except when making one of the procession out of doors, I had not been in their presence for five minutes at a time. But Tom insisted upon my accompanying him into the inner-room for this interview, giving me a great bundle of accounts by way of pretext.

As in London, the apartments had been re-arranged, that is, in fact, disarranged, stripped, suitably to their own customs. For some reason, they had the gas turned only half-way on. There, in the dimness, they sat each upon his own cushioned carpet, the eldest prince occupying the centre, wreaths of smoke of an odd foreign fragrance going up from their hookahs.

Tom Brims, addressing the central figure, made a speech. It was lengthy, for although he came to a pause several times, no answer was vouchsafed to him. He had to go on again. The three muffled-up squat forms stirred not a fold of their white robes, moved not a wrinkle of their impassive faces. I could not understand what Tom was saying, as he spoke in their language, but I could tell that he was talking of the accounts, for he referred to them. Towards the close, he displayed a long list of copied figures, shewing the total of the indebtedness, so far as it was then known. Suddenly, at the recital of the figures, a grim smile shone on the swarthy features of the elder prince; his gleaming eyes turned to his companions on either side. The smile and the flushing look were reflected in the visages of the other princes. With one and the same action they put aside their pipes. At a signal in which they all seemed to join, like clockwork, two attendants who were in the room glided to the doorway, and drew close over it a curtain suspended there. The elder prince tilted his head a little back, but kept his eyes, which were now positively burning in their brilliancy, fixed on Tom Brims, as he deliberately, distinctly, musically said: 'You do well to press so. We know that you English are very honest. Do not you come to India and teach it us?'

Tom Brims had begun to stagger back at the first word he heard. He kept up a staggering retreat upon me, as if each sentence was a blow dealt to him. He had some reason. This taciturn figure, which always when addressed in its own native tongue, had up to this time answered only in monosyllables, had suddenly opened its mouth in the purest English. But the wonder continued. The speaker's grayish moustache curled like a snake.

'Cash our diamonds? It is well we have any. Your masters have left us few in the land. India shone with them before they came, but it is darkening fast. It is like your streets in the morning; the lamps being put out one by one. Pay, you say? Yes. Have they paid so promptly? You flourish our little accounts in our faces; but where is India's bill to present to England? At what figure shall we put down each province she has seized? Value for us the blood you English have shed in oceans. You could not, rich as you are, pay that account, if we could offer it.'

Brims was finally brought up in his retreat by coming into contact with me. I had only entered a couple of paces within the doorway. He turned a white face towards me, gasping forth: 'They can talk English better than I can!'

I was perfectly amazed. Another voice struck in, 'It would not befit us to be without an interpreter.' Which of the other princes gave this explanation, I did not distinguish. The articulation was not so distinct as in the former utterances.

A moment's silence followed. Then the central figure spoke again: 'You have been too bold; the eyes blazed towards Tom Brims; but it is your first offence.' Again the moustache curled itself. 'It would be a pity that one with such good habits of prompt payment should have thus broken down the least in the world. Get all the accounts in readiness for noon to-morrow.' Putting his hand to his girdle, the prince significantly lifted, from a fold in his robe, one end of a long purse, and shook it. It gave forth a sharp, thin rattling sound: doubtless they

were diamonds. 'Schedule everything in clear order; you now have help,' nodding towards me. 'But pray, see that in this so prompt, so punctual paying, so honest England, the charges are not more than a reasonable amount higher than they would be if we were not foreigners and princes.' The prince sitting on the right hand here muttered something in a very low tone. 'In the morning,' resumed the elder, 'we will do without your services till noon, that you may have time to see the percentages are right.'

The simultaneous handling of three long pipes told us that we were dismissed. Brims did not linger for a moment; I need not say that I followed him as closely as possible. The attendants raised the door-curtain for us like mechanical figures.

Tom Brims seized my arm as soon as we got into the other room. 'They have all the time understood my remarks aside to you, my jokes, all the purposed blunders I made about them,' he whispered. 'It is very strange, but I know that young native princes in India are sometimes well taught in foreign tongues. Yet who could have expected this?' He was overwhelmed and chaf-fallen. The discovery that he had been interpreting where no interpreter was needed, completely demoralised him. What he said he spoke in a whisper, as if afraid of being overheard. He could not rest under the roof; nor after we went out-of-doors, did he seem to feel quite safe till we had got some distance away from the hotel. We walked up and down Castle Street. In the end, we found our way to the great landing-stage by the river-side, thronged with crowds of passengers embarking and alighting from the ferry steamers, and by loungers promenading. There he found his voice.

'It does not surprise me,' he said, with a hollow laugh. 'They are snakes—all natives are. You never know where you are with these fellows. As soon as I have gone through the accounts with them to-morrow noon, I must think what I ought to do. These three diamonds they gave me in London, I think I ought to return. But you must stop with them, old fellow;' meaning me. 'You will just do as well with them as myself, now we know they understand English.' Blushing scarlet, he said: 'Cousfound them! Who would have thought it? But it isn't you they made a fool of and insulted.' He pulled out his pocket-book, containing the partially cut diamonds. He repeated that he should give them back; he would show them that Englishmen were not to be treated in that way.

'If you have more diamonds than you like to keep, captain,' broke in a man at his elbow, in a pilot-jacket and a son's wester cap, 'you will find plenty who'll oblige you by taking a few off your hands. I would not mind one myself, by way of a favour.' Grinning, he mockingly held out his hand.

Tom Brims had lost his senses. He was for getting into an argument with this strange man on the crowded pier, beginning to tell him about the princes. It was with difficulty I urged him away, and led him in and out of the bustling groups, up the resounding iron bridge. I told him he must make allowances for their Highnesses. What he had said about prompt payments to them was perhaps too harsh. The more I tried to soothe him, the more furious he became.

It was late when we returned to the hotel, for Tom would prepare himself for revisiting it by first calling at two or three others. The rooms of their Highnesses, who invariably kept good hours, were closed; but two of the native attendants were drowsily awaiting us. Tom, in his increased excitement, was very rude to them. Lifting his voice high enough to penetrate the other close-curtained apartments, he bawled to the attendants, that if they thought an Englishman was to be made a fool of for a handful of paltry diamonds, they were mistaken. They placed their palms upon their foreheads, meekly bowing themselves unto the floor. Tom told them, that, if they did not get up, he would kick them into a more manly attitude. I was very glad to get him into his own bedroom.

On the following morning, he had a little recovered his wits. He said he had thought things over. He should remain with the princes till they returned to London. He had brought them down into the provinces, and he would see them safe back: but once they were again in the capital, the Indian Office might take the responsibility of them. He had been insulted enough. The wealth of India should not bribe him to do what was derogatory to an Englishman. He was not going to weaken her Majesty's hold over the empire in that way. Now that Tom Brims had become a little more reasonable, their Highnesses seemed themselves to have taken to sulking. It was past their usual hour for stirring, still they remained invisible. A little group of their servants crouched, noiseless, motionless, before the inner door, patiently waiting for the signal to enter. After lounging about for some time, Tom seemed to construe the delay into a fresh insult. By way of shewing that he had a proper spirit, he started out for a walk in the town, leaving me to assort a fresh batch of accounts, brought by that morning's post.

I think rather more than an hour had elapsed, when I heard a hasty yet light footstep enter the room in which I was writing. Turning my head, I saw Brims with a newspaper in his hand. His face was of the most sickly hue, and the way in which he distorted his features into a ghastly grin only made his look more startling.

'Are their Highnesses stirring?' he asked in a thin, hollow chuckle, looking eagerly towards the inner door. 'This is a London newspaper—just come in,' flourishing it towards me. 'It is an excellent joke. The princes will laugh at it.'

I dropped my pen in the middle of a very large total, getting up and going towards him. 'What is the matter?' I asked.

'The princes are made to be—ha, ha!—in two places at once. A *Times* telegram says they have landed at Marseille. Isn't it good? There, where I met them. Was there ever anything so ridiculous? Ha, ha! I must show it them.' He addressed himself, in their own language, to the servants crouching before the inner door. They could not tell him what he wanted; in reply, they shook their heads. His whiteness increased; drops of perspiration started on his large features. Bidding me come with him, he unceremoniously pushed them aside.

The atmosphere of the inner room was as hot as a furnace when we entered; the gaslights were burning just as they were overnight. On each of the three carpets lay a turbaned white heap. Tom, holding his newspaper before him, advanced towards the central figure, bowing respectfully. He went nearer, nearer still; he stooped, and touched the prince.

'As I live, it is true!' he called out, holding up a white robe with no prince in it.

It was the same with the other carpets. A flowing robe and the coils of an endless turban lay upon each; but the garments were unoccupied. The princes had vanished!

The hotel was in an uproar instantly at the alarm Tom made. The premises were searched thoroughly; but, as it was clear, from subsequent information, that their Highnesses left the hotel one by one, during the absence of Tom Brims and myself on the previous evening, it ceased to be wonderful that they were not to be found.

In a very short time after this, Tom Brims, I, and the five native servants forming the *suite* were in the hands of the Liverpool police, in pursuance of instructions received from London, on the charge of aiding in the imposition. Tom Brims's princes were not the real ones; they were not princes at all! The true Indian princes, who, with much pomp, had just now reached Europe, had come down to Bombay three months before to make the previously announced journey, but, at the last moment of embarking, one of them was seized with a sudden illness, making an immediate return up country necessary. The daring impostors, who had been years resident in Upper India and acquired the language, sailed for Marseille, and there assumed their Highnesses' names and titles, carrying out the rest of the programme, but giving it a commercial turn, which the real princes had not dreamed of. They must have had accomplices who never appeared with them publicly. These had not only informed them of the movements of the great personages they were counterfeiting, but had travelled on their heels from place to place, and, armed with due authorisations to that effect, had possessed themselves of the unpaid stores of goods of all kinds, removing them, and turning them into money elsewhere at any sacrifice. A very handsome sum had been realised; though doubtless it would have been still more if the genuine nabobs had deferred their arrival a little longer.

The impostors had managed, not unskilfully, to wind up their bold scheme at Liverpool, where foreigners of all complexions and styles were in plenty, and where there were such facilities for getting out of the country. No traces of them could be found; it was not likely. If Tom Brims and myself had met them in any other costume than robes and turbans, the chances are we could not have sworn to them.

I don't care to dwell upon the indignities Tom Brims and I had to go through. He surrendered his three diamonds to the authorities at once: which upon being tested, were duly pronounced to be *paste*! Eight days elapsed before I sheepfacedly crept back into the office in Fenchurch Street; it was nearly a month before Tom Brims was allowed to leave England and to rejoin his maiden aunt in France. Nothing could be satisfactorily made out of the five natives. Whether they were in the secret affair or not, was never known. After they had been detained here for some time, they were reshipped back to Bombay.

It cost us clerks in the Fenchurch Street office one shilling and twopence-halfpenny apiece to have, unknown to the principals, a new mahogany top fitted to the desk Brims had once occupied. But even now there are reminders of the matter. The junior member of the firm, in sauntering through our room, will sometimes say: 'I thought there was an inscription somewhere here to an eminent Englishman who became interpreter to Indian princes!'

Instead of any explanation being given, silence reigns at all the desks, broken only by the more rapid scratching of the pens upon the paper. It is not a pleasant topic, Tom Brims's Indian Princes.

THE END.

A NEGLIGENT CONDUCTOR.

When the train going west over the Detroit, Lansing and Northern railroad had pulled out of Howell the other day the conductor discovered that a man who should get off there was still on board.

'Didn't you hear the brakemen call out your station?'

he asked. 'Yes, I heard him call Howell, but how did I know it was the Howell I wanted to get off at? I've never travelled over this road before.'

'Well, we don't have but one Howell on this line.' 'Then why didn't you come to me like a man and say so? I'm from Nova Scotia, and how was I to know but that your country was full of Howells?'

'Passengers should know where they want to get off,' muttered the conductor.

'So they should, sir, and if you had kindly come to me and notified me that this was the only Howell, and that this was the Howell where my aunt lives, I should not now be here, sir. I shall now decline to get off this train until I have the advice of her majesty's counsel at Detroit,'

—Detroit Free Press.