

The Vendor of Dreams

By Lionel Stevenson.

Prologue.

In silence he sits between twilight and dawn
Where the souls, all released in sleep,
To the foot of his ivory throne are drawn,
And forget they must wake to weep.

Imploring with arms upward raised to his knees
They beg for his solace supreme;
He wisely apportions the various keys
That open the chambers of dream.

Therein they may wander till morning returns,
Find healing and rest from their strife;
And there some most fortunate one perhaps learns
The clue to his problem of life.

His shoulder had been crushed by a falling spar at Trafalgar, so that his left arm hung straight and stiff at his side. Nobody knew what had brought him strolling one day into quiet Roseboro'. Perhaps he had wandered about England till he found a place that thoroughly pleased him, and quietly came to anchor there. It seemed as if he had chanced upon Roseboro' in the course of a morning ramble, and forgot to go away again. After a while, to the general astonishment, he produced a comfortable roll of prize money and purchased the moribund little book shop at the corner of Higham Terrace.

In his quiet way he brought new life to the business. His most surprising innovation was a lending library, which before long was the most important branch of his work. Higham Terrace and the neighboring streets were largely inhabited by maiden ladies of advancing years, by widows with small annuities, and by retired officers who maintained their gentility and their families upon a limited pension. Such lives are among the most tragic in existence: with no work to occupy them, and consequently with no aspirations, hopes and achievements, they live from day to day in the effort to appear on equal footing with one another in breeding, possessions, and inactivity. To anyone who brought imagination to this life in would be intolerable; and indeed, who can tell what bitter disappointment, what fiery though indefinable longing may have lived behind the placid faces of Higham Terrace? Little did any of them realize, and old Peter Newton least of all, that he provided the most beneficent influence to all these lives. For their minds found a more healthy pasture in the books from his library than in the dismal record of their own futile past and eventless future.

They could always rely on his judgment. He was never so indiscreet as to send the Major a volume dealing with missionary enterprise, or Miss Millie a recent work of fiction translated from the French. An astonishing memory and a natural shrewdness in character-reading were what fitted him for his task, although he was little better than illiterate. Words did not come easily to him: much humoring was necessary before he would talk about his sea adventures, which the few boys of the town often assembled at his shop to hear, preferring these narratives to the printed ones in which he dealt.

One day old Peter was sitting in his little shop, as usual very busy spelling out the despatches in the latest newspaper. The news was exciting enough, for

Napoleon, newly bursting forth from Elba with his thousand devoted guards had swept on to Paris, and all France, it seemed, was rising to join his standard. Exciting news indeed, entire Europe found it, but Peter Newton showed no annoyance when he was interrupted by the entrance of a customer. He looked up with his wide smile, and pulled his forelock to the girl whose light blue dress and golden hair seemed to have brought in some of the spring sunshine among the folds of the one and the curls of the other.

"Good morning, Mr. Newton," she said rather gravely. "I feel in the mood for a romance this morning—something ridiculous and happy, to cheer me up."

Peter turned to his shelves. "Here is 'The Warrior Lover,' Miss Mason was quite wild about it." The girl wrinkled her nose in a manner suggesting that she had some secret reason for considering herself a more sophisticated person than Miss Mason. She tossed a mass of curls that made only the faintest pretence of being confined 'en coiffure,' for Miss Felicity Waters was not yet nineteen, and appeared still a child to sedate Roseboro'.

She glanced over the book that Newton offered her, paying particular attention to the closing paragraphs. Then she threw it down petulantly. "All full of sensibility and—and love," she exclaimed, blushing a little as the unmaidenly word passed her lips; "it pretends to base lasting happiness on these. What folly!" Peter's great smile always gave the impression of sympathy, even when he didn't understand one-half of the conversation. He now reinforced it with inarticulate murmurs of assent, and the girl continued:

"What I want is something tragic and horrible. I shall find melancholy pleasure in seeing how true it is

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