

THE DREAM-HAWKER.

By UNA ARTEVELDE TAYLOR.



HE little, deserted, grey town lay lost amongst wide plains of pasture and corn-land. A spell of sleep had fallen upon street-ways and market-place; a spell of sleep had fallen upon the taverns and the

stalls; upon the wharf by the stone bridge; upon the river that ran under its arches. It lay, too, upon the antiquated hostel, the Inn of the Crescent Moon. The Inn, with its courtyard, stood, a wide frontage of latticed windows, at one side of a wide, irregular, stone-paved square—the central point of the straggling township. Fronting it on the further side was that other Guest-House, the Guest-House of Souls, the great jewel-windowed church of holy Helena. From its high niche the saint's effigy, enshrined above the cavernous gloom of the tower's vaulted entrance, might survey the faded blazon suspended over the Inn threshold, the blazon of a moon like a silver sickle on a blue night strewn with six-pointed stars. And blessed Helena, who in the country-folk's invocation "dreamed a dream," might almost be regarded as the patroness of the whole locality, since to her intercession was also ascribed the Fountain Well, occupying the centre of the square, although in truth its miraculous origin dated from pagan times of drought.

However this might be, it would seem that the saint of dreams was, in some measure, also the donor of sleep, and when the mellow bells dropped their slow, vibrating notes upon sunlit or rain-dark air, each chime was wont to sound as though it rang a serene *requiescat* to the hours that die.

At rare intervals, drawn by the renown of that old church, with its strangely gorgeous windows and architecture of mixed Romanesque and Gothic invention, infrequent guests, coming for a night, would prolong their stay. Some had remained, it was reported, even for a year. The English lad, the last guest the Crescent Moon had entertained, who had sauntered into the town with

nothing but a knapsack in his hand—he had stayed and stayed, till his friends had forgotten to wonder at his disappearance. When he, at long last, took his leave of inn and church and fountain, it was with a slow backward look, and, once more in the common world of his old life, was it fancy of his friends, or had he undergone some change? To watch him was like looking at a familiar scene through gauze. The sun shines on summer trees, sparkles on the pond, lies warm on the field of sorrel and clover—only the gauze is between your eyes and all those common things, and by that one thin interposition the near has taken to itself the semblance of the far off.

Now it was harvest-time in the plains. The little lost town, with its winding river, lay a grey blot with leaden ribbon, amongst fields of ripe yellow grains. All day long a man and a woman had been driving towards it through hedgerows powdered white with dust and fragrant with honeysuckle, through meadows where men were reaping, women binding the sheaves, and children playing, gleanings, sleeping; driving on and on under the blueness, intense as blueness can be, of the August sky. Both were of those whose life has run on the levels of what is called happiness. Both had passed their youth, both bore the stamp of unruffled years, tranquil and contented, upon their features. They possessed the goods of the world's giving. They possessed the greater gifts of those children of men who demand no fulfilment of vain illusions. To others the kingdom of passion, with all its crises of joy and despair. They had never knocked at the outermost gate of that temple of the gods. For emotion, a sober affection; for union, a kindly comradeship. What more could man ask of woman or woman of man? Life is life—let us live life as it is, neither as better nor worse, neither as a rapture nor a fever, neither as an ecstasy nor as a madness! Thus they had lived it, unexpectedly, monotonously, calmly, with the sedate record of ships anchored in wind-sheltered havens.

Chance had brought them to the plain.

lands, chance had directed their summer-day wanderings to the little world-forsaken town. They had reached its first outskirts; dismantled tenements, cottages disroofed and fallen to ruin, bronzed with dry mosses, overgrown with orange lichens, with lilac-flowering vetches, all told of a drowsy, serene decay.

In small courtyards the verdure of miniature ferns fringed every moist nook, sun-yellow wallflowers, ground-ivies with red, thread-like stalks, pink, spotted and blood-crimson snapdragons rioted in the interstices of crumbling masonry. Nature, wherever she found a vantage-ground, made manifest her abiding desire to efface the handprint of man.

Tired with the heat of the long day, the horse made slow progress as the road, ascending slightly, led through what once had been the western gate in the city ramparts. The two were walking, waiting from time to time to let the dust settle as the wheels of the carriage rattled over the first paving-stones. The heat was lessening, the afternoon drawing to its close, the sun was sinking towards the horizon as they crossed the three-arched stone bridge over the river with its little deserted wharf where coastmen from far off sea villages had once moored their brown-sailed boats and landed their cargoes of silver-scaled fish. Beyond the bridge was a wider street, leading to the market-place.

The market-place was empty, the stalls were bare. Only one figure moved amongst them, the figure of a ragged pedlar. As they approached, he came towards the entrance; a broad hat slouched over his brows, a yellow scarf knotted at his throat, the gold of heavy rings in his ears. The woman paused. "He stands like the toll-gatherer at the gate," she said, and with a quick impulse she laid a coin in the pedlar's hand.

It fell to the ground. With a sudden swiftness the man swung his pack to his shoulders and with long, swinging steps went his way, murmuring to himself in words they could not catch. Soon he turned down a side street, and the bent figure was lost to view.

"A crazy beggar!" the woman's companion laughed. "What made you give him that?"

"I do not know," she answered. "He looked ragged—old—or—was he old?" she asked, hesitating.

"What matter?" the other answered. "Come!"

They passed on.

The low sun shone in their eyes. The air

was bathed in a phantasmal splendour of rose and amber lights; the massive square of St. Helena's tower rose high above the roofs, it rose against the radiance in dusky amethyst, shadowed with deep purples, broad streaks of translucent green stretched southward and northward, overhead the sky was still blue.

A silence fell on the woman. Her eyes were dizzy with the glow.

The man broke the silence.

"Do you remember," he asked, "I believe to-day is our wedding-day?"

She laughed. She had remembered that he had forgotten. It is a date even the least emotional women bear in mind; it is the record of a final triumph or—of a final loss.

Behind the houses the belated salesman was crying his wares. Now and then they caught the tones of voices by open windows, or the sound of passing footsteps reached their ears. The woman lingered.

"I will go on—you are tired. It is straight on. Shall I?" her companion said.

She assented, she would follow more slowly—he would make all ready at the Inn.

He left her. In the windless heat the copper-coloured pigeons flew heavily homewards, with iridescent breast-feathers catching gleams of metal from the sunset. She was conscious of a drowsy lassitude, her eyes were fixed on the crimson blaze of the west. Glass windows became sheets of flame as they reflected the sunrays. She felt as if she were surrounded by some wild transformation scene of colours at a fantastic pantomime.

The monotonous voice of the wandering hawker haunted her ears. He was still crying his goods. The cry came nearer, receded, came nearer again, as she moved on with laggard feet. At length once more his tattered figure came into sight bent double under his heavy pack. He looked this way and that, paused here, then hurried by—halted—then he was coming towards her on the opposite pavement. She watched him mechanically.

"Who will buy——?" his cry, muffled, husky, was close at hand. Perhaps she was tired, tired with the long day's drive, with the sun-glare, with the tremulous quiver of heat on the high-roads, with the breath of little parched winds which fanned the leaves only to hotter languor. She was exhausted with an exhaustion she had never experienced. And surely her ears, her brain were playing her false—or what was that ragged salesman crying?



"The market-place was empty, the stalls were bare. Only one figure moved amongst them, the figure of a ragged pedlar."

"Dreams! Dreams! Dreams!"

Yes, she was sure, now.

"Dreams, who will buy——?"

The colour-curtain changed. The rose-glow had burnt to orange—the tower reared itself above, a black-purple shadow, unreal as a vision, sombre, yet suggesting a dark transparency. She who cared nothing for such things was aware that she had never seen anything so beautiful in all the world of her narrowed life-days.

The pedlar came closer—he was crossing the street: he stood beside her; he halted abruptly, and her eyes met his. His eyes were young, not old, they were sea-blue, keen as a hawk's in the sun-bronzed face, their gaze was like a touch as it fell on her. She heard him laugh softly.

"Dreams! Dreams! Dreams to sell—a dream to sell!"

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"What kept you so long? I was afraid you had lost the way," the man said when presently she reached the Inn. "I was just coming to look for you."

He did not notice that she gave no answer to his question, as she entered, with him, the doorway of the Crescent Moon.

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It was some two hours later. In the silver-green twilight of the day that had ended and of the night which had begun, the two sat in the garden of the old Inn. Magnolias covered the walls, filling the air with overmastering fragrance, trumpet-lilies bloomed ghost-white in the flower-beds. The woman watched in silence the gradual rising of the copper-coloured disc where the harvest moon ascended a steel-blue sky—the great globe seemed hanging in vacancy, it belonged neither to earth below nor yet to heaven above. Presently her companion left her to pace up and down the moss-tufted walk.

"How silent you are!" he exclaimed after a while, coming back to where she sat. "Are you tired, or shall we see what the town can show by moonlight?"

"Tired?" she moved at once. "Not tired, no; how should I be tired? Has there ever been such a night?" she added almost under her breath.

Together they sauntered out through the arched entrance of the courtyard. Amidst the white sheen the church stood in a dim mystery of beauty.

"It looks as if it wanted to speak," the woman said. "It is watching us, see!"

Her finger pointed where one stained window, the window near some inner lamp-lit shrine, burned like a live ruby in a black-walled transept. Hitherto her unaccustomed silence only had awakened the man's passing notice. Now something unfamiliar in her voice caught his attention, a note in it was new, the words, absently spoken, were strangely unlike her.

"What?" he said, "what are you saying?" Then, looking at her more closely: "You are overtired. Go back and rest. I believe you are half asleep already."

"Oh, no." She drew her hand over her eyes as if to brush aside some floating cobweb. "No, no, I am wide awake."

She seated herself on the stone steps of the Fountain Well a few paces back. Half the square lay in light, half in the deep shadow of church and tower. And the ruby window burned on, an eye watching them in the dark, or—was it a signal? The whole town slept, dumb in its midnight sleep. The meagre drip of the exhausted fountain-jet was the one pulse that beat in the stillness. The man's eyes were fixed on the ebony water in the shallow basin at his feet. A quarter-hour chimed from the tower. Then there was a far-away sound in the dusk of silence.

"Hush!" said the woman, lifting her head. "Hush! listen!"

Her companion turned sharply towards her. An unwonted disquietude was gaining possession of his mind. She was so curiously different from her old self, yet he could hardly say in what the difference lay.

"What are you listening to? What is it?" he asked. Then he too listened. The voice in the distance was nearer, more audible. "What are they crying so late?" he said, as he caught its sound more clearly. "It is a strange hour to choose."

"Not strange, not strange," the woman murmured, smiling to herself. "It is only——"

"Only what?" The man tried to break away from the impression which every moment grew on him. It seemed to him that she had passed into some remote solitude; as if they two, side by side in that slumbering town, were each alone and apart, as if an immense space divided them, as if in very truth for him, for her, the other was not there. He laid his hand on her shoulder. "I tell you, you are half asleep," he said, bending over her.

She was very pale, but her eyes as she



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raised them to his were full of a great surprise, a surprise of an unlooked-for joy.

"It is the dream-seller," she said. "Buy! Will you not also buy?"

The vague dread at the man's heart took sudden shape, it defined itself into a terror.

"Come back to the Inn." He stooped and half lifted her from the stone step.

"Come back now, at once," he went on

urgently. "The sun has been too much for you; you must come back and sleep."

Smiling, she laid her arm round his neck with an all-unaccustomed gesture.

"Buy!" she whispered in his ear.

He led her back to the Inn, tending her as never before he had tended her. A dumb fear, a solicitude that ached with a pang at his heart, stirred within him. He laid her

on the lavender-scented sheets, her hair threading the pillows as if with the fine gold filagree tracery of old Italian tissues, the "golden wire" of old poets' songs. Her pallor was gone, there was a flush where the lashes of her closed eyes touched her cheek; her lips were red as rose-berries. He watched by her till she slept—it was the slumber of a happy child. Fear left him. He smiled at himself because he had been afraid. She had only been tired, all was well with her. Leaning against the framework of the open window, he looked out. The scene had again shifted. The phantasmal mystery of the old church was no longer in shadow, a soft illumination was spreading over it. The moon was sinking, but great stars covered the sky with lanceheads of white fires. A film of silver-green, faint as chrysolite, lay over the stonework of the houses enclosing the square. It was so still that he could even from that distance hear the drip of the fountain-jet. Mechanically he counted the number of strokes as St. Helena's clock chimed again. Then, listening as the last vibration quivered into stillness, he heard the sound of a footfall; someone, surely, passed near the acacia tree at the further side of the square; someone lurked there, under the red ruby window which gleamed across the dividing space.

"Dreams! Dreams!" This time the cry was plain.

Who was it thus haunting the summer night? He would go out and see for himself. He glanced at the bed, at the sleeper. Yes, all was well with her, and he would come back at once; she was safe, she would not miss him. He opened the door with heedful care lest she should waken. Down the stairway, through the little court; out beneath the arched entry the air met him with a breath of warmth. His eyes searched the star-twilight; surely there, along the pavement skirting the houses that bounded the square to the left of the Inn, someone moved—moved slowly from house to house. As he looked a little way off, some ten houses to the left, a window opened in the wall. A sleeper had heard and wakened at the cry? Below the window the wandering crier stopped. From the stone window-ledge above, a hand reached down. From the pavement below, an arm stretched up to meet the hand, then the hand was quickly withdrawn, the window was shut to. The figure upon which the man's eyes were riveted came nearer, he could see it now clearly. It was—he knew it well—

the crazy beggar of the market-place! Yet no—he had been bent, he stooped like an old man, this haunter of the night-fall was erect, strong, lithe—

"It is not he—it is not the same," the man murmured to himself; "he was old and bent."

"Yes, it is he," the Hawker stood at his side—he laughed low as he spoke. "But my pack is light now, very light, very empty. They are sold, my wares. *She*"—he pointed to the window of the Inn—"she bought the best of all."

He made as if he would go by.

"Who will buy? who will buy?" The cry was almost a whisper, yet the listener's pulses beat as he heard it. "Buy—you also buy!" the woman had begged—the woman who lay within, her hair like threads of gold and her lips like the scarlet berry of the rose. Buy—what? Almost unawares he barred the vagrant's path with out-held hand. "Have you none left for me—for me also?" he cried.

Had the heat of the summer night fevered his brain? he asked himself a moment later. He stood alone; the Hawker was gone, his cry was dying away, muffled, jarring, insistent, in the streets behind the square.

Then a touch was on his arm. The woman was with him, smiling as she laid her hand in his.

"I could not sleep longer, it was too beautiful a night for sleep. I had to come. I knew I should find you."

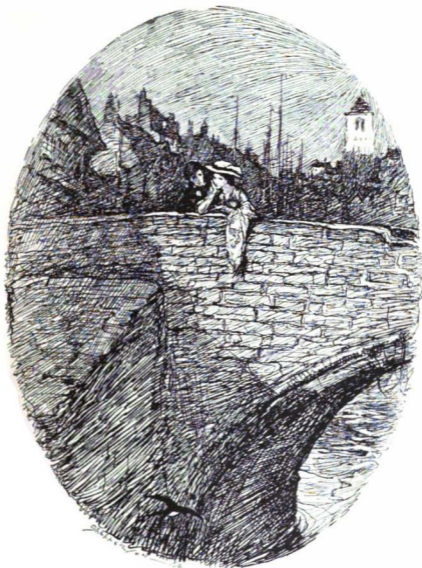
"I wanted you," he said. "I never knew what night could be till now. I wanted you," he repeated.

They passed beneath the feathery foliage of the giant acacias. The moon had set, but the ruby window glowed and flamed.

"You have me, heart's beloved." Her hand in his stirred.

"And still I want you," he answered.

It seemed to her that a wind-wave of youth, the whole youth they two had missed, was sweeping towards them from some immense doorway thrown open in the night, from some infinite reservoir of strength and sweetness and fire and dew, where the wings of life were for ever outspread and the passion of life was for ever upwelling. And that great stream was nearing them, the tree shadows swayed to and fro in the advance guard of its current, the leaves fluttered in its first breath. All the serene years of the tranquil past were effaced, all the unrest of a



"In each rose-light the whole world's beauty was theirs."

great expectancy shook her citadel of peace to its foundations.

"Come!" she cried, "let us go towards it."

"What need? It is already here," the man answered her very thought.

Her eyes filled with the tears of an unmeasurable gladness. That spiritual hurricane had welded thought to thought.

"Our wedding night . . ." she began. "Never, never, before . . ." She broke off. Words had no more use for her. She drew the man's hand across her lips—she let it fall. There was nothing to say, nothing to do; she had passed beyond the joy that seeks for utterance, past the passion that bounds itself in a caress. Life lay within life, heart within heart; lips that touch,

hands that hold, tears, words—these were but love's body, as far removed from her love as the walls of the temple from the flame that burns within it.

"We have never lived." The man took up the thread of her speech, of her muteness. "What have we done with all the lost years? How have we squandered our youth—how have we misspent our life-days?"

She shook her head, setting aside the question. The past for her was not.

"I cannot remember," she smiled. "The arrears are paid." For her, youth, joy, love lay in the hollow of her hand.

He caught the contagion of her supreme oblivion. "Let us make amends for all we have misused," he murmured. And then for him likewise regret itself died.

The wind-wave had swept them to its very centre, at its centre the woman rested her heart's folded wings. Even wonder had ceased; she held joy as her birthright.

They wandered away down streets that seemed as familiar home-places to their feet. Every window was dark; not a light gleamed across the river, not a lantern shone from the moored boats at the wharveside; the water that lapped their planks flowed under the bridge like a moonstone set in silver. Bending over the bridge parapet, they watched the water as it ran by; sometimes speech came to one or to the other, oftener silence came to both. Far in the east a slow paleness gathered, slowly it gilded itself, slowly the floating haze on the horizon caught at its edge the first tinge of rose, and the first cloud-flake floated, like some red petal of the dawn, across the sky. In the water-mirror the shifting colours repeated themselves, rose hues deepened, shot with flame colours, little winds blew fitfully, scattering the tinted thistledown of day-break clouds far and wide over the heavens. A stronger breeze planed the opal surface of the ripples into a sheet of polished steel. There was a rustle in the reed-beds, the brown-flowered rushes shook, a bird awakened, then another, and a swift skimmed the water. Night was over, day was at hand.

In each rose-light the whole world's beauty was theirs; in each little wind, the freshness of all past springs; in each drifting scent of clover from the farther bank, the fragrance of all summer's blossoms; in the touch of hand to hand, the gold of all desires.

"What did you pay for it?" the man asked suddenly.

"All life holds," she said.

There was a pause.

"And you?" she spoke at length.

"I? I do not know." His answer lagged.

"I paid——"

"All that you could, dear heart," she ended his broken sentence. "No matter how much, more can no man give."

With one accord they retraced their steps through the still sleeping town, up by the market-place, through the silent streets into the square.

Swallows were darting about the eaves of the houses, the acacia by the Inn, with its silvered leaves, seemed like a ghost-tree against the grey wall. They turned on the very threshold to look back. The windows of the church were struck by the first sunrays, the ruby light was quenched, the whole building was irradiated by shafts of gold. The sun had risen. A swift shadow, as of an immense fear, clouded the woman's face.

"Oh, my heart's beloved!" she cried.

"We are not dreaming—say we are not dreaming?"

"Dreaming!" Her companion laughed an untroubled laugh of joy. "Then are dreams life's only worth!"

He drew her across the threshold.

"Come!" he said.

"But the day—the day is here," she murmured.

It was a year ago. Once more the fields were white with corn, August dust lay on the hedgerows, and the scent of honeysuckle and clover filled the air.

Through quiet English lanes a man and a woman were walking side by side. A companion, a lad with keen eyes and restless movements, was with them.

"So you found my lost town among the plains?" he asked with a glance of eager inquiry. "You stayed there?"

"One night," the man answered him.

The lad looked from one to the other. He laughed shortly.

"I thought so," he said.

Over the man, over the woman, a change had come. They lived life as they had lived it before; yet the man's eyes held memory at bay, in the woman's lay an infinite regret. A dream had passed over them—and was gone!