

THE VERGER

- Somerset Maugham

There had been a christening that afternoon at St Peter's, Neville Square, and Albert Edward Foreman still wore his verger's gown. He kept his new one, its folds as full and stiff as though it were made not of alpaca but of perennial bronze, for funerals and weddings (St Peter's, Neville Square, was a church much favoured by the fashionable for these ceremonies) and now he wore only his second-best. He wore it with complacency, for it was the dignified symbol of his office, and without it (when he took it off to go home) he had the disconcerting sensation of being somewhat insufficiently clad. He took pains with it; he pressed it and ironed it himself. During the sixteen years he had been verger of this church he had had a succession of such gowns, but he had never been able to throw them away when they were worn out and the complete series, neatly wrapped up in brown paper, lay in the bottom drawers of the wardrobe in his bedroom. The verger busied himself quietly, replacing the painted wooden cover on the marble font, taking away a chair that had been brought for an infirm old lady, and waited for the vicar to have finished in the vestry so that he could tidy up in there and go home. Presently he saw him walk across the chancel, genuflect in front of the high altar, and come down the aisle; but he still wore his cassock. 'What's he 'anging about for?' the verger said to himself. 'Don't'e know I want my tea? The vicar had been but recently appointed, a red-faced energetic man in the early forties, and Albert Edward still regretted his predecessor, a clergyman of the old school who preached leisurely sermons in a silvery voice and dined out a great deal with his more aristocratic parishioners. He liked things in church to be just so, but he never fussed; he was not like this new man who wanted to have his finger in every pie. But Albert Edward was tolerant. St Peter's was in a very good neighbourhood and the parishioners were a very nice class of people. The new vicar had come from the East End and he couldn't be expected to fall in all at once with the discreet ways of his fashionable congregation. 'All this 'ustle; said Albert Edward. 'But give 'im time, he'll learn.' When the vicar had walked down the aisle so far that he could address the verger without raising his voice more than was becoming in a place of worship he stopped. 'Foreman, will you come into the vestry for a minute. I have something to say to you.' 'Very good, sir: The vicar waited for him to come up and they walked up the church together. 'A very nice christening, I thought, sir. Funny 'ow the baby stopped cryin' the moment you took him.' 'I've noticed they very often do,' said the vicar, with a little smile. 'After all I've had a good deal of practice with them.' It was a source of subdued pride to him that he could nearly always quiet a whimpering infant by the manner

in which he held it and he was not unconscious of the amused admiration with which mothers and nurses watched him settle the baby in the crook of his surpliced arm. The verger knew that it pleased him to be complimented on his talent. The vicar preceded Albert Edward into the vestry. Albert Edward was a trifle surprised to find the two churchwardens there. He had not seen them come in. They gave him pleasant nods. 'Good afternoon, my lord. Good afternoon, sir,' he said to one after the other. They were elderly men, both of them, and they had been churchwardens almost as long as Albert Edward had been verger. They were sitting now at a handsome refectory table that the old vicar had brought many years before from Italy and the vicar sat down in the vacant chair between them. Albert Edward faced them, the table between him and them, and wondered with slight uneasiness what was the matter. He remembered still the occasion on which the organist had got into trouble and the bother they had all had to hush things up. In a church like St Peter's, Neville Square, they couldn't afford a scandal. On the vicar's red face was a look of resolute benignity, but the others bore an expression that was slightly troubled. 'He's been naggin' them, he 'as,' said the verger to himself. 'He's jockeyed them into doin' something, but they don't 'alf like it. That's what it is, you mark my words.' But his thoughts did not appear on Albert Edward's clean-cut and distinguished features. He stood in a respectful but not obsequious attitude. He had been in service before he was appointed to his ecclesiastical office, but only in very good houses, and his deportment was irreproachable. Starting as a page-boy in the household of a merchant prince, he had risen by due degrees from the position of fourth to first footman, for a year he had been single-handed butler to a widowed peeress, and, till the vacancy occurred at St Peter's, butler with two men under him in the house of a retired ambassador. He was tall, spare, grave, and dignified. He looked, if not like a duke, at least like an actor of the old school who specialized in dukes' parts. He had tact, firmness, and self-assurance. His character was unimpeachable. The vicar began briskly. 'Foreman, we've got something rather unpleasant to say to you. You've been here a great many years and I think his lordship and the general agree with me that you've fulfilled the duties of your office to the satisfaction of everybody concerned.' The two churchwardens nodded. 'But a most extraordinary circumstance came to my knowledge the other day and I felt it my duty to impart it to the churchwardens. I discovered to my astonishment that you could neither read nor write.' The verger's face betrayed no sign of embarrassment. 'The last vicar knew that, sir,' he replied. 'He said it didn't make no difference. He always said there was a great deal too much education in the world for 'is taste.' 'It's the most amazing thing I ever heard,' cried the general. 'Do you mean to say that you've been verger of this church for sixteen years and never learned to read or write.' 'I went into service when I was twelve, sir. The cook in the first place tried

to teach me once, but I didn't seem to 'ave the knack for it, and then what with one thing and another I never seemed to've the time. I've never really found the want of it. I think a lot of these young fellows waste a rare lot of time readin' when they might be doin' something useful.' 'But don't you want to know the news?' said the other churchwarden. 'Don't you ever want to write a letter?' 'No, me lord, I seem to manage very well without. And of late years now they've all these pictures in the papers I get to know what's goin' on pretty well. Me wife's quite a scholar and if I want to write a letter she writes it for me. It's not as if I was a bettin' man: The two churchwardens gave the vicar a troubled glance and then looked down at the table. 'Well, Foreman, I've talked the matter over with these gentlemen and they quite agree with me that the situation is impossible. At a church like St Peter's, Neville Square, we cannot have a verger who can neither read nor write.' Albert Edward's thin, sallow face reddened and he moved uneasily on his feet, but he made no reply. 'Understand me, Foreman, I have no complaint to make against you. You do your work quite satisfactorily; I have the highest opinion both of your character and of your capacity; but we haven't the right to take the risk of some accident that might happen owing to your lamentable ignorance. It's a matter of prudence as well as of principle.' 'But couldn't you learn, Foreman?' asked the general. 'No, sir, I'm afraid I couldn't, not now. You see, I'm not as young as I was and if I couldn't seem able to get the letters in me 'ead when I was a nipper I don't think there's much chance of it now.' 'We don't want to be harsh with you, Foreman,' said the vicar. 'But the churchwardens and I have quite made up our minds. We'll give you three months and if at the end of that time you cannot read and write I'm afraid you'll have to go.' Albert Edward had never liked the new vicar. He'd said from the beginning that they'd made a mistake when they gave him St Peter's. He wasn't the type of man they wanted with a classy congregation like that. And now he straightened himself a little. He knew his value and he wasn't going to allow himself to be put upon. 'I'm very sorry, sir, I'm afraid it's no good. I'm too old a dog to learn new tricks. I've lived a good many years without knowin' 'ow to read and write, and without wishin' to praise myself, self praise is no recommendation, I don't mind sayin' I've done my duty in that state of life in which it 'as pleased a merciful providence to place me, and if I could learn now I don't know as I'd want to.' 'In that case, Foreman, I'm afraid you must go.' 'Yes, sir, I quite understand. I shall be 'appy to 'and in my resignation as soon as you've found somebody to take my place.' But when Albert Edward with his usual politeness had closed the church door behind the vicar and the two churchwardens he could not sustain the air of unruffled dignity with which he had borne the blow inflicted upon him and his lips quivered. He walked slowly back to the vestry and hung up on its proper peg his verger's gown. He sighed as he thought of all the grand funerals and smart weddings it had seen. He

tidied everything up, put on his coat, and hat in hand walked down the aisle. He locked the church door behind him. He strolled across the square, but deep in his sad thoughts he did not take the street that led him home, where a nice strong cup of tea awaited him; he took the wrong turning. He walked slowly along. His heart was heavy. He did not know what he should do with himself. He did not fancy the notion of going back to domestic service; after being his own master for so many years, for the vicar and churchwardens could say what they liked, it was he that had run St Peter's, Neville Square, he could scarcely demean himself by accepting a situation. He had saved a tidy sum, but not enough to live on without doing something, and life seemed to cost more every year. He had never thought to be troubled with such questions. The vergers of St Peter's, like the popes of Rome, were there for life. He had often thought of the pleasant reference the vicar would make in his sermon at evensong the first Sunday after his death to the long and faithful service, and the exemplary character of their late verger, Albert Edward Foreman. He sighed deeply. Albert Edward was a non-smoker and a total abstainer, but with a certain latitude; that is to say he liked a glass of beer with his dinner and when he was tired he enjoyed a cigarette. It occurred to him now that one would comfort him and since he did not carry them he looked about him for a shop where he could buy a packet of Gold Flake. He did not at once see one and walked on a little. It was a long street, with all sorts of shops in it, but there was not a single one where you could buy cigarettes. 'That's strange,' said Albert Edward. To make sure he walked right up the street again. No, there was no doubt about it. He stopped and looked reflectively up and down. 'I can't be the only man as walks along this street and wants a fag,' he said. 'I shouldn't wonder but what a fellow might do very well with a little shop here. Tobacco and sweets, you know.' He gave a sudden start. 'That's an idea,' he said. 'Strange 'ow things come to you when you least expect it.' He turned, walked home, and had his tea. 'You're very silent this afternoon, Albert,' his wife remarked. 'I'm thinkin',' he said. He considered the matter from every point of view and next day he went along the street and by good luck found a little shop to let that looked as though it would exactly suit him. Twenty-four hours later he had taken it, and when a month after that he left St Peter's, Neville Square, for ever, Albert Edward Foreman set up in business as a tobacconist and newsagent. His wife said it was a dreadful come-down after being verger of St Peter's, but he answered that you had to move with the times, the church wasn't what it was, and 'enceforward he was going to render unto Caesar what was Caesar's. Albert Edward did very well. He did so well that in a year or so it struck him that he might take a second shop and put a manager in. He looked for another long street that hadn't got a tobacconist in it and when he found it, and a shop to let, took it and stocked it. This was a success too. Then it occurred to him that if he could run two he could run half a dozen, so he began

walking about London, and whenever he found a long street that had no tobacconist and a shop to let he took it. In the course of ten years he had acquired no less than ten shops and he was making money hand over fist. He went round to all of them himself every Monday, collected the week's takings, and took them to the bank. One morning when he was there paying in a bundle of notes and a heavy bag of silver the cashier told him that the manager would like to see him. He was shown into an office and the manager shook hands with him. 'Mr Foreman, I wanted to have a talk to you about the money you've got on deposit with us. D'you know exactly how much it is?' 'Not within a pound or two, sir; but I've got a pretty rough idea.' 'Apart from what you paid in this morning it's a little over thirty thousand pounds. That's a very large sum to have on deposit and I should have thought you'd do better to invest it.' 'I wouldn't want to take no risk, sir. I know it's safe in the bank.' 'You needn't have the least anxiety. We'll make you out a list of absolutely giltedged securities. They'll bring you in a better rate of interest than we can possibly afford to give you.' A troubled look settled on Mr Foreman's distinguished face. 'I've never 'ad anything to do with stocks and shares and I'd 'ave to leave it all in your 'ands,' he said. The manager smiled. 'We'll do everything. All you'll have to do next time you come in is just to sign the transfers: 'I could do that all right,' said Albert uncertainly. 'But 'ow should I know what I was signin'? 'I suppose you can read,' said the manager a trifle sharply. Mr Foreman gave him a disarming smile. 'Well, sir, that's just it. I can't. I know it sounds funny-like, but there it is, I can't read or write, only me name, an' I only learnt to do that when I went into business.' The manager was so surprised that he jumped up from his chair. 'That's the most extraordinary thing I ever heard.' 'You see, it's like this, sir, I never 'ad the opportunity until it was too late and then some'ow I wouldn't. I got obstinate-like.' The manager stared at him as though he were a prehistoric monster. 'And do you mean to say that you've built up this important business and amassed a fortune of thirty thousand pounds without being able to read or write? Good God, man, what would you be now if you had been able to?' 'I can tell you that, sir,' said Mr Foreman, a little smile on his still aristocratic features. 'I'd be verger of St Peter's, Neville Square.'

Summary of Somerset Maugham's The Verger

Introduction

Somerset Maugham is a famous English writer. He has written many novels and short stories. This short story is about a verger, who is an illiterate. This story shows how an illiterate man can earn more money and wealth, because of his smart thinking.

Introduction of the Verger

Albert Edward is a verger of a small church. A verger is someone who takes care of the church. Albert has been working in the church for a long time. He takes care of the church very well. He takes great care of his uniform. The story opens with the end of christening ceremony in the church. The verger waits for the vicar to move, but the vicar is staying there.

The Past and the Present Vicar

The vicar of the church has taken his position in the recent past. He is new to the church and to the position. The verger is not comfortable with the new vicar. He considers the old vicar as someone better than the new one. The old vicar had never complained him and had always been good to him. Though the new vicar is good in controlling the child who has come to christening, the verger is not comfortable with him and his manners.

Happenings between the Vicar and the Verger

The vicar calls the verger to his office. Two wardens of the church also come to the vicar's office. The vicar says that he and the church management are not comfortable with the performance of the verger. They consider him an illiterate, who cannot read and write. The two wardens support the vicar. The verger is helpless.

Verger's Illiteracy

The verger accepts the fact that he is an illiterate. He had joined the church when he was twelve and had not attempted to educate himself since then. The previous vicar did not mind about his education. The verger is also able to execute his job in the best way possible, even without proper education. He assures the new vicar that he can continue to do his job well.

Verger Coming out of the Church

The vicar and the wardens do not accept his plea. They almost threaten the verger. Out of compulsion and repulsion, the verger moves out of the church. He resigns his job as a verger. He is confused about the future. He does not know how to earn his living thereafter. In utter confusion, he takes an unusual road to his house. He is hopeless.

Verger a Wealthy Man

After sometime, he finds that he has taken the wrong route. He is frustrated and he wants to ease himself. He approaches a few shops and asks for a cigarette. No shop sells him a cigarette. It is then he strikes with an idea of opening cigar shops. He opens a shop where there are no shops. His business throngs well. He sells more cigars and he becomes wealthy. Later he approaches a few other places where they do not sell cigars and he puts up a new shop there. He becomes a prospective business man. He becomes very wealthy. He hoards more money in the bank.

Conclusion

The verger deposits all his money in the bank. One day the bank's manager invites him for a meeting. He informs the verger that he has save more than 10 thousand pounds in the bank. This is a huge money. The manger asks him to sign a few documents and the verger says that he is uneducated. This surprises the manager and others. They question him what he would have done

if had not started this business. The verger says that he would have remained a verger till the end of his life.

The verger questions answers

A. Answer the following question in one or two words?

1. Where was St. Peter's Church located?

Ans: St. Peter's Church was located at Neville Square.

2. What was the name of the verger of St. Peter's Church?

Ans: The name of the verger of the St. Peter's Church was Albert Edward Foreman.

3. Who were in the vestry besides the verger and the vicar?

Ans: Besides the verger and the vicar, the two Churchwardens were in the vestry.

4. At what age did the verger begin working?

Ans: At the age of twelve.

5. What did the verger want to buy while walking in the street?

Ans: While walking on the street the verger wanted to buy a packet of Gold Flake cigarettes.

B. Answer the following question in few words.

1. What was the discovery that astonished the vicar?

Ans: The discovery that astonished the vicar was that Albert Edward Foreman who served the Prestigious St. Peter's Church could neither read or write.

2. What occupation did the verger take up after resigning from the church?

Ans: After resigning from the church, the verger took up the profession of the tobacconist and newsagent.

3. What impression did the verger have about the new vicar?

Ans: The verger did not have a good impression about the new vicar as he was fussy and wanted to have his finger in every pie. The verger could not appreciate the new vicar from East End but felt that he would take sometimes to fall in with the discreet ways of the fashionable congregation of St. Peter's Church.

4. How did the verger treat his grown?

Ans: The verger treated his gowns with much care, pride, and dignity. He wore his gowns with complacency as it was the dignified symbol of his office. He took pains with it, pressed it, and ironed it himself. He even preserved the old worn out gowns, wrapped neatly up in brown paper and kept them in the bottom drawers of the wardrobe in his bedroom.

5. What was the verger told by the vicar in the vestry?

Ans: In the vestry, the vicar told the verger that he had something unpleasant to say to him. The vicar admitted that the verger had accomplished the duties of the office to the satisfaction of everybody concerned. But he was astonished to find the verger to be an illiterate person. In that case, the verger could not be allowed to continue his jobs in a prestigious church like St. Peter's. Hence, as the vicar said, the verger must learn to read and write within three months or leave his office.

C. Answer the following question briefly in your own words.

1. What thoughts came to the verger's mind as he sat in the vestry with the vicar and the churchwardens? How did the verger react to the vicar's announcement?

Ans: As the verger sat in the vestry with the vicar and the churchwardens, he was wondered with slight uneasiness what could be the matter. He noted that the two churchwardens were sitting at the handsome refectory table and he recalled that the table had been bought by the earlier vicar from Italy. He realized that something was bothering the vicar and the two churchwardens. The troubled look of the two churchwardens led the verger to think that the vicar had been nagging them and might have jockeyed them into doing something they did not like it.

The vicar made the announcement that an illiterate verger like Albert Edward Foreman could not be allowed to continue his job in a prestigious church like St. Peter's. Hence the verger must learn to read and write within three months or leave his office. At this, the verger was not at all embarrassed, rather he reacted with confidence. He bluntly expressed his inability to learn reading and writing at this age as he was too old a dog to learn new tricks. Hence he happily offered his resignation saying "as soon as you've found somebody to take my place".

2. In your opinion, what kind of person was the verger?

Ans: In my opinion, Albert Edward, was a very confident man. He was quite sure of himself. Even when the vicar told him that he had to leave the job of verger if he did not learn to read and write within three months, he did not feel shattered. Rather he told him that he would not be able to learn read and write at this old age and that he happily offered his resignation saying "as soon as they found somebody to take his place".

The verger was also a man of great business acumen and common sense. He decided to open a cigarette shop in a street with a shop selling cigarette, made him a successful businessman.

3. "The manager stared at him as though he were a prehistoric monster".

i. Who is the 'he' referred to in the question?

Ans: The 'he' referred to here is Albert Edward Foreman who was once the verger of St. Peter's church and now a successful businessman.

ii. Explain what made the manager stare at that person.

Ans: Being sacked from the job of the verger, Albert Edward Foreman set up business as a tobacconist and newsagent and in a course of ten years he owned ten shops. He began making money hand over fist. Every Monday he deposited the week's earning in the bank. One day the manager of the bank advised Foreman to invest the money which was a little over thirty thousand pounds. He even assured that the bank would help Foreman to choose the securities, only he would have to sign the transfer. But when Foreman asked the manager as to how would he know what he was signing, the manager replied that of course, he could read the papers. Foreman disclosed that he was an illiterate man, neither he could write nor read. Hearing this, the manager was taken aback. He was shocked to know that a man who could a mass fortune of thirty thousand pounds was an illiterate man. That is why the manager stared at Foreman as though he were a prehistoric monster.

D. Give suitable answers to the following.

1. Character sketch of the verger.

Ans: William Somerset Maugham has portrayed the character of the verger. Albert Edward Foreman though an illiterate person served as the verger of St. Peter's Neville Square for 16 years. He began his life as a page boy at the age of twelve in the house of a merchant-prince. He then rose from fourth to the first footman and later he had been single-handed butler to a widowed peeress. And before being appointed at St. Peter's, Foreman was a butler with two men under him in a retired ambassador's house.

Albert Edward Foreman was a man of confidence and self-respecting nature. When the vicar discovers that the verger could neither read nor write and instruct him to learn reading and writing within three months or leave the job of the verger, he did not feel shattered. Rather he told him that he would not be able to learn read and write at this old age and that he happily offered his resignation.

Albert Edward Foreman was a realistic and proud man with great business acumen and common sense.

2. Narrate the circumstances under which the verger had to lose his job in St. Peter's church.

Ans: Albert Edward Foreman served St. Peter's church as a verger for sixteen years. He accomplished the duties of the office to the satisfaction of everybody concerned. Everything was going on smoothly until the new vicar came.

The new vicar was an educated man. When he came to know that the verger was an illiterate man he was shocked. So, one afternoon the vicar asked the verger to come to the vestry. In the vestry, the verger was wondered with slight uneasiness what could be the matter as he found the two churchwardens already sitting there with the vicar. The troubled look of the two churchwardens led the verger to think that the vicar had been nagging them and might have jockeyed them into doing something against their will while he was wondering about the situation, the vicar told the verger that he had something unpleasant to say to him. The vicar admitted that the verger had accomplished the duties of the office to the satisfaction of everybody concerned. But he was astonished to find the verger to be an illiterate person. In that case, the verger could not be allowed to continue his jobs in a prestigious church like St. Peter's. Hence, as the vicar said, the verger must learn to read and write within three months or leave his office. But the verger refused to take the offer and preferred to resign believing that it was too late now to learn.

It was under these circumstances the verger had to lose his job in St. Peter's church.

The Hollow of the Three Hills

As the October sun sets, a beautiful **young woman** and a withered **old crone** meet at an appointed time in a darkened hollow between three hills. The old crone asks that the young woman state her business quickly, as they can only remain here for one hour. The young woman states that she is a stranger to this land, but that it does not matter where she comes from. She is here because she has abandoned her loved ones, and she's now cut off from them forever. Unable to rid herself of the guilt, she has come to the hollow to ask about their welfare. The old crone promises that the young woman will receive the information she seeks before the sun sets, and the young woman agrees to do the old crone's bidding, even though doing so will certainly kill her.

With their agreement made, the young woman lies with her head on the old crone's knees. The crone draws a cloak over the young woman's face and begins to mutter a dark incantation. Soon, the young woman begins to hear sounds. Though initially indistinct, they become clearer and clearer, until eventually she can make out an entire scene: a ticking clock, the roar of a fire, and the despondent voices of a man and a woman. The man and woman speak sorrowfully of their missing daughter, who has brought a shame upon

their family that will follow them until the day they die. They also speak of a second, more recent misfortune, but their voices fade in the wind.

The young woman finds the vision humiliating, but there is more to come. Once again, the crone draws her cloak over the young woman's face and begins her prayer. Soon, the young woman hears a second scene, in which chains rattle and a cacophony of voices shriek, laugh, and sob in unison. Eventually, the young woman can make out the voice of a man who speaks desperately to anyone who will listen about his wife, who betrayed her wedding vows and abandoned her home. However, his voice is quickly drowned out by the screams and shouts of the people around him, and their collective voices once more fade into the wind. The old crone asks if the young woman ever expected that there would be so much joy in a madhouse. The young woman responds that there is joy but also misery.

The old crone states that there is one last vision remaining. For a third and final time, she covers the young woman's face and begins her incantation. The young woman now hears the mournful ringing of a church bell, which grows increasingly loud until she can distinguish the sounds of a funeral procession, led by a priest reading burial rites. Though the gathered mourners do not speak aloud, there are whisperings of a daughter who abandoned her parents, a wife who

betrayed her husband, and a mother who left her child to die. With this final vision done, the old crone attempts to awaken the young woman, but she is no longer moving. The old crone chuckles to herself.