

# Weird Tales



March, 1953

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

*That was what the little shop was for—to sell dreams.*



# The Dream Merchant

BY HAROLD LAWLOR

O'GARA was grateful to the little shop, because it was the first thing in which he had taken any interest since Jean's death six months before. It had become, with time, a proprietary interest.

The shop had been vacant for a long, long time. It stood at the corner of the alley behind a duplex apartment building in a neighborhood not generally zoned for com-

mercial purposes. Perhaps some venal politician had permitted it to be built there in the first place.

O'Gara lived in the next street but one, and used to pass it every night. Coming home from work, deep in his own misery, for a long time he passed it without noticing it, but gradually it impinged on his consciousness.

He thought it strange that the little shop should stand unoccupied, for it seemed an ideal location for a delicatessen, handy to the wives of the neighborhood who could slip out in their housedresses for that pound of coffee or butter that they'd forgotten at the super-market.

Quite without realizing it, O'Gara grew fond of the vacant store. It seemed so forlorn. Perhaps, in his woe, he identified it with himself because of that quality. Certainly when he noticed, some weeks later, evidences of activity about the place, he felt a curious surge of gladness that seemed, on the face of it, absurd. He used to watch then, every night, to see what manner of business might open there.

He was puzzled when finally he saw the new sign upon the window. Across the glass was written, in elaborate golden script:

DREAMS  
BY  
ALIDA

It seemed an odd name for a commercial shop. Back of the display window, black velvet curtains completely hid the interior of the store from view. O'Gara was curious, wondering what manner of wares might be sold there. Candy, cookies, lingerie, gowns? With that name, it could be anything.

That first night he saw the sign—it was a Wednesday—curiosity impelled him to try the door, but it was locked. The same thing happened on the two succeeding nights. On Friday evening, when he couldn't gain admittance, he asked his landlady if the shop were open for business yet.

"Why, yes, I think it is," she said. "I passed there today, and the door was open, and I saw a saleslady inside. I caught only a fleeting glimpse of her, but she seemed a very attractive girl."

But she was unable to tell him what sort of stock the new store carried, and O'Gara went upstairs to his lonely apartment, his curiosity entirely unsatisfied.

He was not without a sense of humor, O'Gara, though it had been dampened by tragedy these six months past. But now he said to himself: "This is a fine thing I'm getting worked up over! Making a mystery

out of what sort of goods are sold in a little two-by-four shop that I could almost put in my pocket and walk away with."

His handsome, haggard young face grimaced at the folly of it. But even so, he knew what he'd be doing the next afternoon, and it came to pass just as he had mentally predicted. He worked but half a day on Saturdays, so that he passed the shop on his way home at one o'clock in the afternoon. He went in, and stood gravely before the tall young girl on the opposite side of the glass counter.

HIS landlady, he saw, had been right. The girl was lovely. Night-black hair, rain-gray eyes under brows that swooped in delicate upward curves. She was tall as he, and beautifully formed. It was the first time since Jean's death that O'Gara had consciously looked at a woman, and even now his inspection was cursory, so obsessed was he with his mission.

"Excuse me," he said diffidently, "but I had to come in. Please charge it off to simple curiosity. That sign on the window? It's driving me crazy." He grinned sheepishly. "What is it that you sell?" She smiled. "Why, I sell dreams. I'm Alida."

She had a lovely voice, O'Gara noted. Rich as chocolate, thick as cream. He felt a strange sympathetic rapport between them, as they smiled at each other, half shyly.

"Dreams?" he wondered. "What kind of dreams?"

Alida said, "What would you dream of? Wealth? Fame? Happiness? Business or professional success? You have only to name it, and I will make your dream possible." Her smile faded then, as she noted the mourning band upon his sleeve. "Perhaps," she said, low, "it's none of these. Perhaps you would want to dream, instead, of someone you loved who is gone?"

"Yes," O'Gara said huskily. "Yes, that's it. I would."

"One moment."

Alida turned, and moved sliding doors, revealing shelves behind them. They were laden with candles of every description. Short ones, tall ones, straight ones, twisted ones, of every tint and shade. She drew forth a short, pointed white candle in a ruby

candlestick, and placed it on the counter before O'Gara.

He fingered it gingerly. "It's not some kind of—of dope?"

She was shocked at his question. "Oh, no! It's entirely harmless of itself. Buy it if you like, and light it tonight, and I promise that you will dream of the one who is gone."

Ah, well, he'd let himself in for this. There's one born every minute, he reflected, and obviously the girl knew the truism, too. Still, he was here, and had yet to make a graceful exit. He inquired the price, and since it wasn't high he paid it without demur, took the candle and its holder, and made his escape, thinking that it was worth the nominal cost.

At the door he looked back, he didn't know why. Alida was regarding him strangely with those soft dark eyes. "Good-bye," she said quietly. "And I hope the dream makes you happy."

And O'Gara dropped his hat, dropped the candle, retrieved them both, and left, feeling all kinds of a fool. He was acting, he realized, absurdly like a man in love.

At home, he put the candle and its holder on the mantel, resolved to leave them there as an ornament only. He was a Celt, but not a mystic. Of course he'd never light the thing! Dreams! No telling what the thing was. It might even contain opium or hashish. Though likely it was harmless enough, he thought grudgingly, remembering the girl. She'd been very pretty, and seemed very kind. A fine business she'd picked for herself! Dreams!

But the thing is, despite his strong intentions, he did light the candle that Saturday night. Even O'Gara himself never inquired too closely into his motivation for the act. Curiosity, hope, despair? Any of these, or perhaps a blend of all three, led him to light the candle. . . .

**S**UNDAY he could do nothing, for the shop was closed, and the day passed for O'Gara in a fever of impatience. On the Monday following, O'Gara didn't go to work. He was at the little shop as soon as it opened, respectfully making his request of Alida, regarding her with eyes that almost worshiped.

"I would like another candle like the one you sold me Saturday," he said.

"Ah!" Alida said. "It was as I told you? You had your dream?"

O'Gara nodded. "There's one thing, though. I would like a larger candle this time. The dream didn't last long enough."

"Would you tell me about it?"

O'Gara hesitated. It seemed a thing too sacred for revelation. But surely he owed as much to Alida, who had made the dream possible?

So he said: "I lit the candle Saturday night, almost against my will, thinking it was nonsense. For some time, nothing happened. And then—then the room began to fill with a rich blue smoke that thickened and thickened, until at last I felt myself rising, lightening—until I knew I was no longer in the room, but floating down a long, dark tunnel.

"I was not asleep!" O'Gara stressed, though Alida had made no interruption. "I was as entirely conscious as I am now. At the end of the tunnel, I came out into a bright room, painted entirely white, with white velvet curtains drawn across the back, shutting out from my view whatever might be beyond.

"And on a gold settee in the white room, I saw—Jean. Jean, with an infant in her arms!"

"Jean?" Alida questioned softly.

"My wife," O'Gara explained. "She died six months ago, in child-birth."

Alida made a soft sound of pity in her throat. "And what happened in the white room, Mr.—?"

"O'Gara. Everybody calls me Dan."

"What happened then—Dan?"

O'Gara looked distressed. "That's the trouble. I wanted to rush to her, to take her and the child in my arms. But I couldn't move. She was happy, I saw, sitting there playing with the baby. But everything faded so fast that I'm sure she never even realized that I was there, or she would have given me some—some sign. That's why I want another candle. Please, a larger one, that will last longer."

He was startled to see Alida hesitate.

"Please!" O'Gara said again intensely. "You must."

He was relieved when Alida sighed, and reluctantly drew from the stock in the cabinet behind her, another pointed white candle, longer than the first. O'Gara hurriedly paid the modest price, and left to go home with his prize. In his eagerness, he never thought to speculate on the reason for Alida's seeming reluctance to sell him another candle.

And, behind him, watching him go, stood Alida, her finger thoughtfully tapping her lower lip, an inscrutable expression on her lovely face.

O'GARA was back on Tuesday morning, his wallet in his hand.

"Another!" he said hoarsely, like a drunkard.

This time there was no mistaking Alida's reluctance. She took her hands from the counter and backed away, shaking her head.

O'Gara looked his surprise, then apologized. "I didn't mean to be rude. It's just that I'm so eager."

"What happened last night?" Alida asked.

O'Gara frowned. "Something went wrong. Oh, I went to the white room again, and saw Jean, all right. But—but she acted as if she didn't want me! She went through the white curtains at the back, and I couldn't follow. Surely there was a mistake? She couldn't have recognized me. You must sell me another candle, Alida, please."

Alida shook her head. "Dan, don't ask me to do that. It would be wrong, wrong."

"Wrong? And you sell the things?"

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with a dream. It can be a beautiful thing, once in a while. But not—not as an escape from reality."

"What has reality to hold for me?"

O'Gara asked bitterly. "I want Jean."

"That's where you're wrong!" Alida cried. She came forward, and took his arm. "Jean doesn't need you. She's happy. What you've had is gone. Life doesn't end for the living. You can't continue to live forever in the past. You must go on. Look, Dan, tell me. You didn't go to work yesterday, or today, did you?"

O'Gara swallowed. "No. But—"

"You see?" Alida said. "It's the dream.

You're losing yourself in it, forgetting there is life to be lived."

"I tell you, I *will* have another candle!" In his urgency, he leaned forward, grasped her arm roughly till she cried out.

"Dan! Dan, you're hurting me!"

He looked down stupidly at his big hand on her arm, became conscious of it and of the strong, almost electric, current that seemed to flow up his own arm from hers and into his body. He released his grasp, looked deep into her eyes, like one coming out of ether.

"I'm sorry," he muttered thickly. "Very sorry, Alida. But I still want the candle, and nothing you can say will make me change my mind."

Alida sighed. Frowning, she turned slowly toward the cabinet, and when she placed a candle again on the counter before him, O'Gara drew back.

"That—that candle is not like the others!" he said.

It was a squat, square candle, faintly pink in color.

"No," Alida answered readily. "It's not."

"Then—?"

"I want you to buy it."

O'Gara shook his head. "It—it's a trick of some kind."

Alida did not lie. She leaned closer to him, looked up into his eyes. "Yes, a trick, if you want to call it that. But a pleasant one. There is nothing to fear. I only want to help you. Please, Dan, if you're grateful at all for the other candles I sold you, take this one home and burn it tonight. Please—" she pleaded. "For me."

O'Gara grew conscious of her wonderful smoky eyes, of the beautiful plane of her cheek, so close to his lips.

"And if I do—but only to please you, mind, and out of gratitude—tomorrow you will sell me another white candle like the first ones?"

"Yes," she said. "If you so desire."

And thus it was that O'Gara hurried home to light the squat pink candle that would make him dream of—Alida. Dream just once of Alida.

After that, he was to learn, a clever woman in love could proceed from there.