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THE WONDERFUL THING

A DREAM STORY
by Henry S. Whitehead



Author of "Sea Change," "The Fireplace," etc.

NONE of his acquaintances would have had the face to call Mr. James O'Hara a dreamer. In Zachary Taylor's day that was as much a term of reproach as it is today; as it was in the time of Joseph!

He was just twenty-four when he elected, after due conference and counsel had been taken, to leave the paternal home in Newark, New Jersey; for seeking one's fortune was in the air even seven years before the California gold strike began to strew on the transcontinental routes the long lines of bleaching bones which have been there ever since.

Unlike most, Mr. O'Hara did not go West. Instead, he went into Connecticut, which was a prudent decision, however little it might promise adventure. Just then, in Connecticut there were opportunities for a skilful land-surveyor and engineer without the necessity of braving the wilderness with a pair of derringers.

He traveled from Peck Slip by the Hartford packet, and early the next morning up on the forward deck, with swirling mist dissipating itself in curling wisps as it faded into the mellow crispness of a July morning, the soft greenery of the gentle hills

above the Narrows Gorge, just below Middletown, caught his fancy, and it was at Middletown instead of Hartford that he disembarked, among the fertile farms of that good bottom-land. He had no intention, though, of delving into the land for a living. His work lay on the surface, measuring rods, perches and poles for other people.

Mr. O'Hara obtained a small house at a bargain on High Street near the Wesleyan College, and shortly, on the strength of his gilt-edged recommendations, steady employment on the new Central Vermont Railway east of the river, a solid, permanent, and highly-paid piece of work after his own heart.

For his household he secured the services of Abel and Judy, once tobacco-field slaves, and Judy cooked, while old Abel pitted his everlasting "miseries" against serving Mr. O'Hara's meals when he was at home, and toting the fireplace logs when advancing autumn claimed its toll of firewood.

MR. O'HARA'S professional duties took so much of his time that he had had little time for social intercourse with the Middletown gentry,

and, beyond an occasional afternoon spent in Westfield or Walnut Grove with his fowling-piece after ruffed grouse or quail, he had seen little of the lovely country to the north, west, and south of Middletown. He had never, for example, penetrated as far as Durham, among its foothills to the west, until he went there by the imaginative route of his great dream.

He had been wakeful one night, puzzling out a way to save his employers as much as possible on bridging a tumbling trout stream, and it was very late when he fell asleep.

He dreamed with a clearness he had never known before in a mere dream (as he told himself afterward, many times), and the dream began with his breakfast. He could hear old Abel muttering to himself behind the kitchen door as he ate. Judy must have been blowing him up harder than usual, he thought, and smiled to himself at their odd ways. He would give Abel a half twist of tobacco for solace.

He was aware that he had taken this day off from his work across the river. This was, in fact, a very extra-special kind of day! Shortly, as soon as breakfast was over, he would be going upstairs again and titivating himself in a more-than-ordinary toilet. Great things were afoot.

He had decided, he knew, upon his second-best pair of nankeen trousers, those which had the pigskin straps, as being somewhat better made than his very newest pair; and these were now lying, carefully folded and brushed, across the straight back of a chair in his dressing room.

He finished his breakfast leisurely, and then mounted the stairs and dressed himself very carefully. He polished the outer case of his globular Rentnow watch, and tightened those pigskin trouser-straps a hole tighter before drawing them on over his shining boots. Ah! that was it! As if he had been melted and run into

them! With a large silk handkerchief he polished the gleaming surface of his beaver hat until it glistened like the coat of Sallie, his saddle-mare. He brushed his thick, black hair carefully and turned the edges forward in a sweep above his shapely ears. Finally (most delicate task of all) he held his breath and tied his cravat. Then he pulled smartly together the lapels of his fine broadcloth coat, and descended.

He mounted Sallie at the door, Abel grinning from ear to ear to see the master so spandily groomed this morning, and set out, Sallie caracoling, upon his way to Durham.

He rode slowly, along a road still thick with summer's dust, a road scented with the almost sickly sweet of the maturing hardhack and the occasional head-turning breath of fox grapes. He noted pleasantly every rabbit that darted across his path; he smiled amusedly at the strutting purple grackles, like diminutive crows, infesting the newly cleared cornfields. As he passed through shaded bits where woodlots hemmed the road, grouse drummed booming in the thickets. It seemed to him as if he were traveling this road after many and many a previous journey, and that a tryst lay ahead.

At high noon he entered the Durham Village high street, through straggling shanties and outhouses at its beginning, where some elderly blacks, like Abel and Judy, were engaged in clearing the interminable cornfields. Then he passed row after row of great, gaunt tobacco barns. Last came the more pretentious and decorative dwellings of Main Street.

PAST all these familiar places the young man rode blithely, along the side of the road where the deep dust lay somewhat less chokingly thick.

At last he drew rein and dismounted before the very finest of the Main Street dwellings, quite a man-

sion with fluted Grecian pillars fronting a broad porch; and he tied Sallie to an iron hitching post with a horse's head atop, one of those the Douglas Pump Works in Middletown was beginning to supply to the more esthetic-minded of its clients. He opened the gate, not without some emotional flutterings in the region of his broad chest, and approached the house along a flagged walk with its stones set wide apart, and the grass between neatly sickle-shorn.

The gate, weighted with an iron melon (also a product of the Pump Works), shut to behind him with a smart click, and he raised his eyes to the porch.

Thereon was a lady, her banded hair low over her ears, herself swathed in summery flowered muslin. She laid down, as she rose to greet Mr. O'Hara, the current *Godey's Lady's Book*, and then she walked, with little steps, her crinolines billowing gracefully, along the porch to meet her approaching cavalier.

Mr. O'Hara bowed from the waist, his beaver hat held smartly in his left hand; the fingers of his right extended fanlike on his breast.

The lovely lady curtsied discreetly.

In this porticoed house Mr. O'Hara knew himself to be on a footing of delightful intimacy. Here were good friends. He followed the lady along the porch into the shade of a thick honeysuckle vine, now gemmed with noon's quota of belated humming-birds darting like jeweled bees through the vine laden yet with summer's sweetness. The two seated themselves a little ceremoniously side by side and looked long and ardently into each other's eyes. Mr. O'Hara broke the silence. He spoke very softly.

"You had my letter. Edith?"

"Yes." The lovely lady's eyes sought the ground. Her little foot tapped. A wave of lovely color began to suffuse her face.

Mr. O'Hara took her slender hand in his. She left it there.

He sighed deeply. This was a sign. "Then you—you will, dear?"

Mr. O'Hara liked her answer better than if it had been in words. She merely inclined her head upon the ruffle of his cambric shirt—as fine a shirt, be it known, as any Lawyer Burnham Pease, the dandy of Middletown, could boast.

Mr. O'Hara placed his good right arm very tenderly about her very slim waist, and this movement causing her head to turn very slightly toward him, he leaned forward respectfully, almost as if there were something sacramental about what he was doing, and kissed her on the lips.

Then very gently, it seemed to him as he dreamed, he released her, released his affianced bride, for such now was the lovely lady by virtue of her tacit acceptance of his written proposal for her hand, and rising, they proceeded into the house. There followed midday dinner, to which feast Mr. O'Hara, it seemed, had been duly invited beforehand, and Edith's father took Mr. O'Hara by the hand and shook it approvingly; and Edith's mother had fetched from a cool cupboard a slim bottle of cowslip wine; and everything was glorious and delightful and wholly satisfying in that most satisfactory of imaginable dreams.

Mr. O'Hara stayed quite a long time after dinner, too, it seemed to him. He started homeward about 4 o'clock. He rode, as it were, on air, and gentle Sallie paced charmingly in a way she had at particular times, and so did not disturb his thoughts.

But as they were emerging from the last of the dwellings along the Durham village street, just as they were about to enter upon that stretch of their journey which was bounded by the plantations before they should plunge abruptly into the cool greenery of woods, Sallie, ambling quietly,

struck her hoof against a rounded pebble and stumbled, and young Mr. James O'Hara, sharply awaking at the shock, found himself sitting bolt-upright in his own bed.

IT WAS like a sudden emergence into a strange world. The details of his familiar surroundings seemed very dim to him as he rubbed his eyes and looked about in the pale moonlight coldly flooding the room, and they took a long time to assume their proper place in his waking understanding. For there was a breath of honeysuckle somewhere, and a great and abiding happiness suffused his whole being.

Then, as facts, in the shape of the highboy across the room and the stark bedposts, replaced gradually the shimmering glory of that ride to Durham Village, and he passed the point where he had reluctantly to admit to himself that *this* was reality, that other only a dream, the young man was puzzled to find how largely bewildered and annoyance bulked in his thoughts.

He rose out of bed, much troubled, and lit first a candle and then a cigar. He pulled on a dressing gown and slippers, sat down in a chair, and tried to think.

It seemed even then curious to him, but the incidents of that dream were all clear-cut, like cameos. They did not fade out in his mind as the material of which dreams are made fades commonly. They were all precisely as if it had been a real happening just passed through and not a dream at all.

Another circumstance puzzled him exceedingly. The dream had begun in the midst of a fairly long and very intimate acquaintance with this family in Durham. Their name was Foote. That he knew, but he was certain that the name had not once been mentioned during the course of his imaginary visit. He knew, too, exactly what had been in that letter

about which he had asked her on his arrival. He put himself back (it was quite easy) into the atmosphere of the dream, and so musing he could even remember writing the letter; more dimly, previous visits, many of these.

But thinking now of this remarkable occurrence with a cool draft on his bare ankles to remind him that he was awake here in his room, he knew that it was only a fabric woven of moonshine, very lovely, very beautiful moonshine! He was not engaged to be married. He had not drunk three slender glasses of cowslip wine. He had never been within three miles of Durham in his life. Of course there had been no letter, no previous visits. There were no such people as the Footes. Edith did not exist!

His Edith! She would always, that he knew more clearly than anything else, have his heart—his heart held delicately between her slender hands . . . the figment of his imagination, a girl of gossamer.

Young Mr. James O'Hara, practical land-surveyor, took his puzzled head between his two hands and groaned. Then, realizing that this was moon-madness, he gathered as best he could his scattered wits, and viciously hurling the blackened corpse of his cigar into the grate, he blew out the candle and tumbled wearily back into bed.

There were no psychanalysts in 1842 to reassure people about their dreams. That the dream, as these allege, is always the expression of the wish, was a doctrine which Mr. O'Hara had never heard. And even if he had heard of it, he was possessed of too much Celtic common-sense to take comfort in anything of the kind. For the first time in his life he discovered himself, who should be immersed in the intricacies of oosts, and parabolas, and tangents, and bridge-building, caught instead in the chain of love,—love for a phantom! It was sheerly maddening. Had ever blameless young man been so afflicted?

Seeking antidote, Mr. O'Hara plunged with driven energy into his work, but even this eminently sensible course did him no good. He called himself names. He even swore at himself. The alternatives of tavern whisky and suicide did, it must be admitted, cross his mind, so hard was he hit with this deadly weapon forged of love and moonlight and the smell of a honeysuckle vine.

For three bitter weeks he found no respite. He bore his trouble grimly, with teeth set, as his ancestors had fought their battles. But he lost weight, and a few faint lines began to appear in his face.

THEN one morning, late in October, when the leaves had all turned and were making a glory of the woods, one blessed morning, he woke up free. The terrible incubus of that despairing grief had lifted itself from him, and he rose out of sleep and out of his bed with a song on his lips. Gone were his pain and care; his obsession had left him.

As he dressed he remembered it for the first time, and the remembrance brought a twinge, but it was a twinge merely of remembrance. There was none of the almost physical agony which had accompanied his every waking moment those three weeks gone.

He descended to breakfast with a tune lilting on his lips, and so gratefully was he to the unknown power that had freed him and given him instead this unaccountable gayety, that he did not even try to fathom it or to analyze what had happened to him.

There was biscuit and honey for breakfast, and bacon, and crisply fried thin slices of fresh calves' liver! It was the bacon and liver which reminded him of something vaguely joyful with which it was somehow associated.

Suddenly he remembered. There had been biscuit and honey, and

calves' liver and bacon, for breakfast here in this room on the morning of that dream, when he had sat cogitating about the second-best pair of nankeen trousers. Suddenly he paused. He was listening to hear if Abel would be muttering, as he had *that* morning, behind the kitchen door. He heard it, and little cold chills ran up and down his back.

Here were three separate and distinct indications: the unaccountable gayety of his rising, which was precisely the way he had felt (did he not remember every tiny incident and emotion of that dream?) on *that* morning. Second, the breakfast. It was precisely what Judy had sent in then. Third, Abel's grumbling.

He called Abel and enquired what had disturbed him. It was Judy's nagging. Judy, said Abel, was getting worse and worse all the time. Some day . . . Well, she'd see!

"There's a half-twist of tobacco for you," said Mr. O'Hara. Abel grinned broadly, his troubles already forgotten.

Then, a good-sized chill taking possession of his back: "Saddle Sallie. Give her an extra-special rub with a handful of clean straw. Have her at the front door at 11."

Abel departed, his grin still evident.

Mr. O'Hara rose and got out the half-twist of tobacco. He mounted slowly to his room. He sat down in a chair and tried to think. Running through his head and not to be ignored was the thought of the ride he was going to take that morning. He would tempt fortune. He would go a-larking in quest of his will-o'-the-wisp. He would follow, as far as it led him, the road of the dream. The first few rods of it were plain, anyhow. It simply followed High Street to the corner, and turned up Washington. After he had got that far, he would see! He needed a day off from his work anyhow. That was

days and days ahead of the schedule. He earned his big salary, did Mr. James O'Hara.

Humming a tune, he started in with a leather-backed clothes brush on that second-best pair of nankeen trousers. . . .

WHEN he had got some distance up Washington Street, farther than he had ever been before in that direction, the chills took possession of him a third time that morning. For here was a turning, and Sallie took it almost without pressure on the bridle-rein. It was the first of the turns of his dream-road.

He rode on. He noted rabbits scurrying across the road, the purple grackles strutting in the cornfields; even an occasional ruffed grouse drumming abruptly caused gentle Sallie to prick up her ears anxiously. From time to time that little creeping chill would run up and down his spine and he would have to look about him hard at this object or that, or stoop forward to pat Sallie's curving sorrel neck to reassure himself that this time he was awake.

He passed slow-footed negroes clearing the very last gleanings from the cornfields. Slowly he rode on through the plantations, out of the cool woods, past the shanties at the village's edge, then on through the rows of increasingly comely dwelling houses. He urged Sallie gently over to the road's side, where the impalpable dust lay less thick than in the middle.

When at last Sallie, again almost without urging, turned in before a dignified, white, porticoed house, well back from the hot road, and with white Grecian pillars before its broad veranda, he did not dare to look at it squarely, and he was stiff and trembling like a leaf when, by the force of sheer will-power, he dismounted, and began with fumbling, shaking fingers to tie Sallie to the ornamental iron horse-post with a horse's head atop,

which stood before the picket gate. Sallie nuzzled his hand with her soft lips as if she understood dimly what ailed her master.

Then, leaving Sallie, and walking almost drunkenly, every nerve in his body jangling, he forced himself to the gate and pushed it open. It swung shut behind him, impelled by the weight of an iron melon hung in the middle of a chain. The gate shut with a sharp snick. That brought him up and served to pull him together a little. He was actually here! The chills seemed to recede a little. He held up his head as an O'Hara should at all times, and stepped almost jauntily along a flagged path, the stones well apart, the grass between neatly trimmed.

Almost before he knew it, he was close to the house. He looked closely at the porch. He saw a lady, her face like chalk, rise unsteadily from a chair at the far end. He could not see her face clearly, for her outline was somewhat obscured by a thick honeysuckle vine which grew all over that end of the porch. She was laying down something; something about the size and appearance of a magazine. Summery light muslin billowed gracefully about her as she leaned for support against the nearest fluted pillar.

THE lady turned terrified eyes in Mr. O'Hara's direction, and his heart stopped beating, and then, very slowly, he thought, resumed.

He snatched off his beaver, and his forehead suddenly felt cold despite the sweat which streamed down his face and into his eyes. He clicked his heels together and bowed, his hat in his left hand, his right trembling against his breast, the fingers, fan-shaped, beating like castanets against the full ruffle of his fine cambric shirt.

Trembling again now, as if with an ague, his face set, the breath hissing through his dry lips and between his set teeth, he mounted the steps. The

lady still leaned against her column, her face deathlike in its stricken pallor. Stiffly Mr. O'Hara walked the length of the veranda, reached out, and took her hand in his trembling fingers. It felt like ice, and commiseratingly he closed his strong hand about it. The lady made no effort to withdraw it.

Twice he tried to speak, but the words caught in his dry throat. Then, grimly, licking his lips to moisten them, he managed to croak: "Edith!"

He felt that he had shouted, but only the faintest whisper emerged upon the quiet warm air.

The lady's light grasp tightened convulsively on Mr. O'Hara's hand.

"James!" she breathed, and with a great effort raised her head and looked into his eyes.

Mr. O'Hara saw the terror in hers dissolve, to be replaced by another look which he never forgot. She never told him, then or later, what she thought she saw in his.

Mr. O'Hara, delicately, respectfully, almost apologetically, placed his arm supportingly about the lady's slender waist.

"I—I dreamed of you," he muttered.

"And I—of you." The words were just audible.

The lady's eyes seemed to Mr. O'Hara to grow very dark and deep and tender.

"Three weeks ago," said she.

"Three weeks ago," repeated Mr. O'Hara.

"On Wednesday night."

"On Wednesday night."

In a muse, Mr. O'Hara gently disengaged his arm, and the lady sank into a seat. He seated himself beside her, and in a voice which, as he proceeded, gradually assumed its ordinary inflections, told her of his dream, to the accompaniment of many little nods of comprehension and corrobora-

tion, wondering looks, and quick, comprehending glances. Their restraint was past when he had finished.

"I watched you down the road out of sight," she said, "that afternoon."

Her voice trailed out to nothingness. She turned and looked, after a little interval of silence, again, searchingly, into his eyes.

"It is a wonderful thing," she said, "a great marvel that we have seen,—together."

The faint, incessant drone of many humming-birds invaded the dreamy quiet of the veranda. It had been a very dry, hot summer, a lingering summer, that summer of 1842. There were still a great many humming-birds, and the warm fragrance of the honeysuckle poured itself out feverishly.

THROUGH the quiet of the warm noon there came the sound of footsteps from the hallway, and Mr. O'Hara and the lovely lady stood up as Mrs. Foote came out upon the veranda.

Mr. O'Hara bowed again from the waist, the fingers of his right hand resting gallantly, fanlike, upon his broad chest, his hat held smartly.

"This is Mr. James O'Hara, from Middletown, mother," said Miss Foote.

Hospitality beamed from Mrs. Foote's kind face. This was a very personable young gentleman who had ridden over from Middletown to pay a call upon her daughter.

"Dinner is just ready, Mr. O'Hara," said Mrs. Foote. "Sam will take your horse."

She turned into the house to see about the extra place at table.

"John, John," they heard her calling. "John, get a bottle of that cowslip wine out of the cupboard next the milkroom, will you, dear!"