

THE DREAM MERCHANT by John Morley

The ancient alley was one of those that had survived the Great Fire and Hitler's Blitz and now hid among the modern bustling thoroughfares of the anthill that London has become.

As the man walked into the alley, he wasn't confident that he'd find what he was looking for. If he didn't soon, he'd abandon the search, as the morbid drizzle showed no signs of relenting.

There'd been a warning on the website that the pub was hard to find, but the enthusiastic reviews from satisfied customers had been too tempting to ignore. Having selected half a dozen old pubs in the City he'd decided to visit them all on a solitary pub crawl. The Good Samaritan was the last on his list.

The alley widened into a dismal courtyard and continued out the other side. There were only two premises in the yard. One was a locksmith's workshop, but it was the other that caught the man's eye. There was a small shop window, above which was a painted sign 'The Dream Merchant'. The window display consisted only of a small blackboard and easel, such as might be a child's toy. On the board was written in chalk "Remember your dreams. Instant recollection guaranteed. Money refunded if not satisfied."

Now that was something the man had never seen before. He'd read somewhere that everybody dreamt something every night. For himself, he often awoke knowing he had been dreaming, but without any idea what the dream had been about.

"Perhaps I should go in," he mused. "It's money back if it doesn't work. Nothing to lose." His mind was made up as the drizzle suddenly intensified. He grasped the door handle and went in. There was no doorbell, but as he entered a ceiling light came on to reveal a small room looking a little like a doctor's surgery. There was a desk and chair, a single visitor's chair and a small safe, but no other furniture. The carpet was of good quality and the walls were covered with painted paper, but bare of pictures. Directly behind the desk was another door, which immediately opened to admit a small, dapper man who looked to be about sixty, casually but expensively dressed, balding, with a trim, greying beard,

He beamed at the man. "Good afternoon. Please sit down. A cup of tea?"

The man sat. "No, thank you. I came in about your notice in the window. How can you make me remember my dreams?"

"Ah, I can't divulge my methods. And it doesn't matter how, does it? I have never had a customer who couldn't remember his dreams even on the first night, and as the sign says I'll give you your money back if you are not completely satisfied."

"Well, I suppose the next question is the price. How much do you charge?"

The Dream Merchant smiled. "I try to keep my prices low, even though I have no genuine competition. Let's say twenty-five pounds. How does that sound? I can't take cheques or cards, but it's not a lot, is it? If you haven't got it with you pop it in any time you're passing."

The man was amazed. "Twenty-five pounds!" The Dream Merchant nodded. The man stared at him. "I hope you don't mind my saying so, but business can hardly be brisk. You can't get much passing trade, this place is well off the beaten track. And the rent and rates in Central London. How can you make a living at that price? How many customers do you get?" He stopped abruptly. "Sorry. None of my business."

The Dream Merchant hadn't stopped smiling since he'd entered the room. "I make enough for my needs. If I charged more I might deter some of the admittedly few customers."

"Alright," said the man. He reached into his inside pocket and produced a wallet, from which he took a twenty pound note and a fiver, which he held across the desk. The Dream Merchant accepted them and, still smiling, popped them into a drawer in the desk.

"Give me your hand, either hand"

The man extended his right hand, and the Dream Merchant took it between his two and held it for a few seconds. His touch was gentle and his skin cool but dry.

"There you are," he said, "that's all that's needed."

The man looked at him doubtfully. "That's it?"

"Yes. You'll wake in the morning and remember every detail of your dreams. I promise. And you'll remember every dream for the rest of your life. Look, I've put your £25 in the drawer and I'll leave it for a few days. If you're not satisfied, come in and it'll be waiting for you."

"Fair enough. I'll be going then. It'll be interesting to discover what I dream about."

"I'm sure it will", said the Dream Merchant.

"Well then, good afternoon. By the way, could you point me in the direction of the Good Samaritan pub?"

But the Dream Merchant had already gone out through the opposite door.

The man shrugged and left the shop to resume his search.

A day passed. On the morning of the second day the man entered the courtyard. He was unshaven, his hair unkempt, and he looked to have dressed in a hurry. His eyes stared wildly. On the tube he'd been oblivious to the curious and fearful looks from everyone who'd seen him. Even though the carriage was full, he had a seat to himself. He sat staring out the window into the blackness. On his walk from the station, he was unaware that the people who saw his face hurriedly turned away, only to turn and stare after him when he'd passed.

He strode to the Dream Merchant's shop and almost fell through the door. The ceiling light came on, the opposite door opened, and the Dream Merchant walked into the room, his habitual smile already in place.

"Good morning," he said. "Let's see, was it Monday you were here?"

The man almost screamed. "Make it go away. Make it go away. Oh please say you can make it go away."

"Make it go away?"

"Yes, for pity's sake. The dreams. They're terrible. Worse than terrible. I was too frightened to go to sleep last night, so I didn't go to bed, but I fell asleep in the chair and when I woke they were back."

"Back?"

"Yes. The first morning I remembered the dream but thought it was something I'd eaten. But last night a different dream, but even worse than the other. I should have come yesterday, but I thought it was a one-off or something. But it wasn't. It was you. Please tell me you can make it go away. Oh please! If you can't make it go away I'll go mad. Or kill myself. I can't live with this."

The Dream Merchant was still smiling, but his smile was now sad, sympathetic even.

"Of course. If you want me to I can make things as they were. You'll be like everyone else again. You'll dream but when you wake you won't remember a thing. Yes, I can do that."

"Thank God!" The man's face relaxed dramatically. "Thank God! Please, do it now."

"Certainly. It'll just take a moment. There will be a further charge, of course."

"Whatever. Just do it."

"The fee for a reversal is £10,000, I'm afraid, and I must ask for payment in cash before I can proceed."

The man didn't respond at first. He appeared mystified, but as he realised that his ears had not deceived him, he exploded. "Ten grand? Talk sense, man. Ten grand? How do you arrive at that figure?"

The Dream Merchant maintained his smile. "You asked me how I could make a living from so few customers. This is how."

"I can't pay you," said the man, "I haven't got it."

"Then I can't help you. The fee is £10,000 in cash. I'm sure you can borrow it, or sell something, your car perhaps?"

"No", the man summoned up new courage, "no, to hell with you. I'll put up with it first."

He fled the shop.

At midday on the next day, the man again entered the shop. He carried a briefcase. He looked even worse than before. His hair appeared to have gone greyer overnight. The Dream Merchant made his usual entrance. "You're back. Do you have the cash?"

"Yes, I've got cash, but have a heart, man. I've sold everything I can put my hands on this morning, and I've borrowed what I can. But if you insist on cash, I've only been able to raise £8700. Please accept that. I'll give you a cheque for the rest. Don't present it for a day or two and there'll be funds to honour the cheque, but I can't face another night. Please make it go away. Please."

The Dream Merchant relented. "Alright, give me the cash and a cheque, and I'll make an exception."

The man sat down, produced a bundle of banknotes and a cheque book from the briefcase. He scrawled out a cheque and pushed it and the cash across the desk. The Dream Merchant counted the cash, examined the cheque, and carried both over to the safe, which he opened using a combination, and put them inside.

He sat again. "Give me your hand. Either hand."

The man offered his right hand. Dream Merchant took it between his two and held it for a few seconds.

"There you are," he said, "that's all that's needed."

"This better work. If it doesn't I'll come back here and kill you before I kill myself. I swear to God I will"

"Oh, it's worked already. You're back where you were three days ago. No need to worry."

Despite his anger, the man couldn't restrain his curiosity. "You're a monster; but I still don't understand how you manage to make a good living from this. We agreed you don't get many customers, and how many of those can have dreams as terrible as mine and agree to give you ten grand?"

"Don't you see?" said the Dream Merchant, "I make a good living because every single customer comes back as you did, and gives me £10,000 to reverse the process. Every single one. And they all get the cash from somewhere."

The man was aghast. "Everybody. All with dreams like mine?"

"I don't know what your dreams are like. I never know what their dreams are like. I don't need to know or care to know. So long as they come back and pay the fee."

The man turned for the door. "It damn well better work" he snarled.

The Dream Merchant called out to him before he could go out into the yard.

"A minute before you go". He opened the desk drawer and took out a twenty pound note and a five pound note. "Here you are. I promised you I'd give you this back if you weren't a satisfied customer. I can see you're not satisfied, so here you are. I always keep my word. I'm an honest man."

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