

THE SERVANTS OF THE LAMP

Once upon a time, there was a lamp. Inside the lamp was a genie and whosoever controlled the lamp controlled the genie; and the genie was bound to grant him three wishes. It was both very simple and immensely complex: there were three wishes, but a million ways for them to go wrong. A man who wished to live for ever would find himself doomed to an eternity in the ever-shrivelling body of a wrinkled dotard. A woman who wished to be a sultan would be embroiled in a useless war that would destroy first her kingdom, then her family and then herself. A boy who wished merely for boundless wealth would receive all the gold and diamonds in the world, and then end his life in jail.

One day, the lamp – which was easily lost – came into the possession of a king who, instead of immediately making a wish, placed the lamp in a secure place and called to him a council of the wisest men and women in the land: viziers and ministers, scholars and witches, alchemists and wives. He told them that he had acquired the lamp, not for himself – he was a king, and already had everything a sane man might want – but for his kingdom. Accordingly, he said, he wished to treat the lamp not as a brief fountain of personal pleasure, but as a *resource*. This lamp, he told the council, would provide happiness, peace and prosperity for generations to come, ensuring that the king's name would be written across heaven as his people lived in harmony, safe in the knowledge that everything was ordered for their security and joy.

But how, asked one, could this be? The lamp was not only untrustworthy, but also incapable of making more than three wishes. Many had tried, but the result was always the same: after three wishes, the genie vanished, appearing only when someone else acquired the lamp. It was moreover impossible to wish for multiple wishes: this had been tried many times, and had always failed.

Too, said another, there is the question of trust. For if the genie is wily and the lamp unreliable, then its users were ten times worse. His highness might make wishes for the good of all, but what of his successors who, let it be muttered, might lack his high-mindedness and wish for personal glory as they let the kingdom fail and its people die?

The king smiled. This, he told them, was why he had assembled a council of the wisest: to find a way to, as it were, keep the lamp in line, to impose a discipline on its usage, and turn it into a device for doing good. For the lamp and the genie, he said, are no different to a blacksmith's forge, or a sailing ship, or any other creation: they are but machines, which must be controlled lest they get out of hand; just as a forge can be used to create implements of torture and not useful tools, or just as a ship that is not crewed properly will lose its way on a voyage or smash into coastal rocks, so the lamp must be tamed, and made subject to intelligence and will.

Consider (said the king) the carrying of a message, he said, from my lips to that of the simplest farmer. How my words leave my mouth, to be heard by my vizier, who repeats them to a soldier, who tells them to a runner, who runs into the countryside, and tells the message to the farmer. In this instance there are many opportunities for error or misunderstanding – a wrongly-heard word, or a deliberate change in meaning, for example – but thanks to the wisdom of the vizier, the discipline of the soldier, and the determination of the runner, my words reach the farmer and he is able to do my bidding.

Or imagine (the king went on) a tower, the tallest of towers whose many floors and levels reach high into the sky. A tower that perforce must take decades to build, and whose original architects would be long dead before it is completed; yet a tower whose every

storey must be in correct proportion to the one below. Such a tower must be planned with precision and no room for error, so that its builders, who change with each generation, will know precisely how to continue in their work. For repetition demands perfection, and lack of perfection will end only in disaster.

Such were the examples that the king provided for his councillors, and they saw at once the magnitude of their task. How to ensure, firstly, that those charged with the wishing would not ignore the king's plan and wish only wealth and success for themselves: for even the most loyal and humble subject, when faced with the chance of infinite riches and pleasure, might have his head turned and his mind warped. Secondly, even if an honest and incorruptible person were to be found, then how might the continuance of the three wishes from person to person be transferred each time? Thieves and rogues would ever be circling, not to mention the risks of natural disaster, war or famine. Thirdly – and most important of all - even if honest men were in plentiful supply, and the handing-over of the lamp could be accomplished as easily as one man handing a cup to another, what should the wishes themselves be?

The councillors thanked the king for his wisdom and guidance, and retired to consider his words. A month later, they asked for an audience with the king, which was granted, and they gathered in the scented garden of his palace.

"O King," began the most important of the viziers, a man who had become a vizier to the king because his father had been a vizier to the old king, and his father a vizier to the old king's father before him, "We have thought long and hard, day and night, as the clouds have passed across both moon and sun - "

"It is summer," interrupted the king. "There are no clouds." And he dismissed the vizier with a wave.

The second of his viziers now stood.

"O King," he said. "We are pleased to bring you the fruits of our deliberations that you may sample them."

"Let us hope they are not bitter," said the king, and the vizier smiled nervously.

"Our first thought," he said, "concerns the inability to wish for more wishes. We feel that this is the prime obstacle to happiness. If we could find a magician, or a sorcerer, we could pay him to remove this obstacle for us."

"So you would give the lamp to a common warlock?" asked the king. "And ask him to undo a spell that none have ever been able to undo?" And he dismissed the second vizier.

The third vizier, younger than the rest, stood up.

"O King," he began.

"Get on with it," said the king.

"Very well," said the young vizier. "I shall."

The king raised an eyebrow.

"The problem as I see it is not the multiplicity of wishes," said the young vizier. "Nor is it the integrity of the one who is wishing – for it is possible, surely, through a system of threats and rewards to ensure a level of honesty in this matter."

"Then what is it?" asked the king, intrigued.

"It is this," said the young vizier, and he reached into his robes.

The guards were on him in a flash, their cruel curved swords pressing into his neck.

The vizier let out a choked sound, and held up the object he had been reaching for. It was a seashell.

"If I may," he said, and the king signalled for the guards to retreat.

“This seashell,” he said, handing the tiny object to the king, “represents the succession of wishes over time.”

“A shell?” laughed one of the viziers. “You dare compare the desires of the king to a dirty little shell?”

“Yes,” said the young man. “Observe, if you will,” he said to the king, “How each part of the shell repeats itself, in spiral after spiral. See how the shape pertains even as each chamber grows further and further away from the original seed of the shell.”

“I see the shape,” the king agreed, “I see how it grows. But I do not see how it resembles the wishes.”

“The small chambers are the first wishes,” said the young man. “They are perfect, are they not? But see, as the shell grows – and note that this is a tiny shell, a beautiful miniature – the chambers become coarser, less well defined. Just as the wishes, over time, will also lose their perfection and detail.”

He took the shell back from the king.

“You spoke of a tower,” he said. “That tower, if I am right, will never attain perfection because as time passes, each floor will become a less perfect copy of the one below, until eventually the highest levels will be nothing but crude monstrosities and an insult to the king who ordered them built.”

The king frowned.

“I sense truth in what you say,” he replied. “But what can we do?”

The young man smiled.

“You are wise, o King,” he said. “And you have shown your wisdom by summoning men almost as wise as you. But there is one wise head you have not consulted.”

“Who?”

In answer, the young man pointed at a small hexagonal table beside the king’s couch. On it was a jewelled casket with three keyholes, and inside that casket was the fabled lamp itself.

“The occupant of the lamp himself,” said the young vizier.

There was a terrific hullabaloo at these words. The other viziers called out that he was insane, and a traitor, and a troublemaker. The guards, uncertain what to do, tried to form a shield around both the king and the lamp at the same time, and ended up nearly tipping the casket onto the floor.

After a while, the king raised his hand.

“The genie,” he said. “You wish to consult the genie?”

“Yes,” said the young vizier.

“But would that not count as a wish?”

The vizier shook his head.

“Rubbing the lamp is merely a summons,” he pointed out. “And if we can agree on a formal set of words for you to use when addressing the genie, o king, we will be safe. Of course,” he went on, looking at the other counsellors, “Measures must be in place to ensure that nobody else accidentally makes a wish.”

The king nodded his agreement. “Go send for my archers,” he told the captain of the guard.”

Soon all was prepared. The lamp was carefully lifted from its casket and placed in front of the king, while a company of archers, bows at the ready, faced the counsellors,

ready to spit any one of them with a fast arrow the moment a word left his lips, and a page held a scroll up for the king to read from.

The king picked up the lamp and, after looking at it for a moment, rubbed it with his hand.

Immediately there was a clap of thunder and the sky was filled by a dazzling light that seemed to be full of dust and sand and stars. When it had settled, everyone gasped as one, for standing in front of the king, arms folded and head thrown back in seeming defiance, was a djinn.

“Who has summoned me?” said the djinn, looking round.

The archers tightened their grip on their bowstrings, lest one of the viziers make his own claim.

“I,” said the king and before the djinn could answer, began to read from the scroll.

“I have summoned you, o genie, to be my servant and to grant the wishes that I and my descendants shall make. But first I seek, not to make a wish, but to ask your advice should you agree to make such advice freely and not as part of a wish.”

It was a hastily-agreed form of words and the king had trouble reading it all out, but it must have worked, because the djinn nodded and said:

“I understand. Before making a wish in the time-honoured manner, you would like to ask my opinion on something. That is unusual, but acceptable. Speak, I pray you.”

And the king, much relieved, told the djinn of his desire to preserve the wishing power of the lamp for generations to come.

The djinn nodded again. “It is good,” he said, “that you seek to use the powers of the lamp to help your people, and the children of your people, and their children’s children. For too often have I been pressed into the service of evil and corruption. I have seen kingdoms fall just so a sheikh can possess a woman, and I have seen cities burned just for the sake of a sack of treasure.”

“Then will you help us?” asked the king. “We have heard,” he added, lest the djinn think him naïve, “of the wiles of the djinn.”

“I will,” said the djinn. “I am wily and cunning, it is true, but I am also old and weary of the venality of both man and djinn.”

He thought for a moment.

“Yet this is no easy problem,” he said. “It could take centuries to solve.”

“We do not have centuries,” said the king. “Unlike you, we are mortal men.”

The djinn frowned.

“I have it!” he said and he leaned forward and spoke quietly into the king’s ear. The king furrowed his brow, thought for a moment, and summoned the young vizier, who, on hearing the king’s whispered words, nodded once.

The king turned to the captain of the guard.

“I trust you with my life,” he said.

“Yes, o king,” said the captain, who had risked his own life many times to save the king, both in battle and at home.

“And I know you are sworn to defend the kingdom.”

“At all costs, o King,” said the captain.

“Then it is settled,” said the king.

Holding the lamp in his hands, he addressed everyone present in a clear voice.

“I agree with the djinn that the matter of the management of wishes is a complicated one, which will take years to resolve, but we do not have years in this world. I

therefore propose that I, along with my kingdom and all those in it, shall enter the world of the djinn, where time moves differently, until the matter is resolved.”

And, before anyone could speak, he again rubbed the lamp.

Again there was a clap of thunder and a burst of light, but this time, when the light was gone, so was the djinn, and the king, and the king’s garden, and the palace, and the city, and every part of the kingdom. All that remained was the lamp, and the desert sand, and the Captain of the Guard, who stood there for a while, as if expecting everything to return, before picking up the lamp like a baby and walking off into the evening sun.

Where he went, no-one knows. If he ever thought of rubbing the lamp himself, none can say. But the kingdom has never been seen since that, and nor has the djinn.

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