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## THE DOWN-TO-EARTH GENIE

Every month when the moon was full, something strange would fly across the night sky over the small town of Gullybool. For a long time, the people who lived there had been trying to guess what it might be. A group of local puzzlers was standing outside the factory where they worked. They always took a break at this particular time to come out and stare up at the strange object. "I reckon it's a plane," suggested one of the workers. "No," said another, mumbling through a mouthful of sausage roll. "It hasn't got any wings; and if you look at the shape it's more like a door." A third worker dipping a biscuit into a mug of tea declared positively: "Can't be a door." She paused as she watched the soggy part of the biscuit break off, drop into the tea and sink; then she added: "It's all floppy and shaggy round the edges. I'd say it's a carpet of some kind."

This last suggestion did seem quite possible, except for the fact that carpets don't fly. "Unless it's a flying carpet," said the tea-mug-lady with a chuckle; and that sparked lots of ooh's, aah's and could-it-really-be's. The chatter died down as the factory Foreman appeared in the entrance. "Tea break's over," he reminded them. "You can look at the sky thing again tomorrow night; for now we've got rubber bands to make."

Mr Sprong who owned the Sprong Rubber Band Company watched from a window as his workers filed back into the factory. He turned when his office door opened and the Foreman came in. "We're going to have to do something, Mr Sprong," he said grimly. "The last delivery of rubber we bought isn't nearly as good as the stuff we used to get. The bands we're making from it are very poor, and they keep breaking. Our customers won't be happy with them, and they might decide to buy from somewhere else."

"I know, Fred, but what can I do?" said Mr Sprong sadly, "I can't afford to buy better rubber."

"You could if you didn't pay your workers so much."

Mr Sprong looked sternly at him. "I will *never* pay them less!" he stated firmly. "They work very hard and they deserve every penny; and don't forget: they have families to support. What kind of a man would I be if I cut their pay packets?"

It was obvious he wasn't getting through and Fred sighed. "The kind of man whose factory will have to close if he doesn't. Then everybody suffers."

Once the factory finally shut down for the night, Mr Sprong went home. After what Fred his Foreman had said he was feeling bad thinking about his workers, and that *he* had obviously caused the problem they all now faced. He tried to sleep, but the worry wouldn't let him; so he decided to go for a walk. This took him to the edge of town where he stopped and realised he was still no closer to solving the problem. About to trudge back home, he caught sight of something and hesitated. Coming towards him across the fields was a figure. Mr Sprong waited. In a minute he was frowning. The approaching person was wearing flowing robes and an odd hat. Another minute and a man was standing before him. "Greetings," the strange man said, "I am Bizmuth, Genie to my Grand Amir Abu Hassan Gott'a'klu. Er... I don't suppose by any chance you've seen my carpet?"

Mr Sprong was wide-eyed in disbelief. "A genie? I thought genies were only ever in fairy tales."

"That's as maybe," said Bizmuth, twirling his moustache, "But, as you can see, I'm real enough. Now, about my carpet." Mr Sprong explained that he and everyone else in Gullybool had seen what might have been a carpet flying across the sky most evenings. "That's it," said Bizmuth; then as an afterthought added: "I imagine it's gone now." Mr Sprong nodded. Bizmuth sighed. "I guess I'll have to wait until tomorrow night when it comes over again. It will, you know. If I'm not on Sequence telling her what to do, she'll just keep going and going."

"Who's Sequence?" asked Mr Sprong.

"My carpet, of course," declared Bizmuth, rather surprised by what seemed to him a dumb question. "Magic carpets have to have names. You can't just call them Carpet, otherwise they wouldn't know which one you were talking to."

Mr Sprong was frowning deeply. "Sequence is a *magic* carpet?"

Bizmuth tutted. "What else? How do you think I can fly across the sky every night if my carpet wasn't magic?"

"But you're *not* flying," Mr Sprong reminded him. "You're down here and your carpet, er... Sequence, is up there somewhere going round and round without you. How did that happen?"

"Well," said Bizmuth, "It's a long story." The genie went on to explain that he had been flying along on Sequence, preparing for his next visit to a great Chieftain who was having a few problems. "I was topping up my lamp with wishes when something bumped into me, shaking Sequence, and I fell off."

Mr Sprong said: "And I presume your lamp with the wishes is still on the carpet. I don't suppose you have a spare wish in a pocket, maybe? Then you could wish to be back on Sequence when she comes over tomorrow night."

"Sadly," said Bizmuth, "It doesn't work like that. Wishes can only be carried in the lamp; not in pockets or bags."

It seemed there was no solution, and Bizmuth was worried that he would have to spend the rest of his life on land instead of flying wherever he wanted on Sequence. "And I shall miss her," he added with a sob as they began walking back to town.

“All is not lost,” said Mr Sprong, and he meant it, being the kind of person who always tried to look on the bright side. “You can stay with me tonight and we’ll make plans. I’m sure we can come up with an idea to get you back on your carpet.”

Next day the pair was at the factory early. There was much to do in preparation for when Sequence flew over that night. Mr Sprong explained to his workers: “My idea is to make up a giant catapult – I saw one in a circus once. We can use it to fire Bizmuth high in the air and drop him back on his carpet.”

“Won’t that be a bit risky?” asked Fred the Foreman. “What if we miss?”

“I hope we don’t,” answered Mr Sprong. He turned to the genie. “The choice is yours, Bizmuth. Are you up for it?”

Bizmuth agreed to take a chance. So, throughout the day, workers spent all of their time making some really thick rubber bands for the catapult, and also a big wooden frame that the bands could be fixed to. The last item was a seat for Bizmuth. The catapult was put together outside the factory; then it was just a matter of waiting until Sequence came flying over. This seemed to take an age making everyone fidgety. Finally, however, one of the workers spotted the flying carpet coming over the horizon.

“Now,” said Mr Sprong. “As soon as the rubber bands are pulled back tightly, you sit on the seat, Bizmuth. Fred, you get ready with the trigger. This has to be timed right. Don’t fire until I give the signal.”

Fred had been concerned while they had been making the rubber bands. “I’m still not sure about them,” he said. “I have a horrible feeling they’re going to break at just the wrong moment.”

“They should be strong despite the poor rubber,” said Mr Sprong. “We did twist the bands into a rope. We’ll know soon enough: here comes Sequence. Get ready – five, four, three...” He hesitated as one of the bands making up the rope suddenly snapped. “...Fire!”

Fred pulled the trigger to release the catapult. Just as he did, another rubber band broke. They all watched, hearts in mouths as Bizmuth was sent zooming into the air towards Sequence. Unfortunately, because of the broken rubber bands, he didn’t go high enough to land on the carpet; but instead hit the underside of it, then came sailing back down to earth. A second after he landed, something hit him on the head. He blinked and looked where it had fallen beside him. “My lamp!” he said in surprise. “When I hit Sequence, it must have rolled off.”

“Well,” said Mr Sprong. “We may not have got it perfect, but it seems to have turned out right in the end. At least you’ve got your lamp back, Bizmuth.”

The genie groaned. “Not that it will do me much good.”

“Yes it will,” chirped Mr Sprong, “You said you were putting wishes in it. All you have to do is use one to wish yourself back on Sequence.”

“Afraid not,” moaned Bizmuth dismally. “You see, genies can grant wishes to ordinary people, but we aren’t allowed to wish things for ourselves.”

“Ah, that does sound like a problem.” Mr Sprong did what he always did with problems and stared at his feet for an answer. Not that his feet told him anything, but an idea suddenly

spronged into his head. “Is there a wish still in the lamp? It didn’t drop out in the fall, I hope. If there is, could you get it?”

“Hang on a tick,” said Bizmuth. What happened next was very peculiar. Although he was many times bigger than the lamp, the genie somehow managed to make himself so small that he was able to climb through the spout. The waiting crowd could hear him moving about inside the lamp; then he poured out of the spout and grew back to his normal size. He showed them a sparkling green jewel in his hand. “There’s only the one, for all the good it will do.”

“So,” coaxed Mr Sprong, “Could you grant it to me?” The group of workers began muttering, believing their boss was being totally selfish, wanting to be granted a wish when the genie granting it was in such trouble.

“Very well,” said Bizmuth after a moment’s thought. “It’s no use to me, and you have *tried* to help. I grant you one wish.” He passed the jewel over to the factory owner.

Taking the jewel, Mr Sprong looked up into the sky. Sequence was no longer above him, but was heading off into the distance. Crossing his fingers that he wasn’t too late, he said loudly: “I wish Bizmuth was back on Sequence, his magic carpet. If that’s okay with you.” His closing comment was intended for the genie, but when he looked around there was no sign of him. “Where did Bizmuth go?” he asked.

Fingers pointed up into the sky. “Where you wished him,” said Fred, “He’s back on his carpet.”

Sure enough, when Mr Sprong looked up, there was Bizmuth leaning over the side of Sequence and waving down to them. Then the carpet did something that it had never done before. Not only did it turn around and start back; but it came down to earth right next to the factory. “You could have used the wish I granted just for yourself, but you didn’t,” said the genie. “Instead, you spent it on me. Because of that, and for the great service you have done me, please accept these.” Bizmuth reached out towards Mr Sprong, in his open hand three sparkling jewels. “Use two of them wisely.”

“But there are three, are there not?” puzzled Mr Sprong.

“There are indeed,” said Bizmuth with a chuckle. “I suggest you use the third to wish for some better rubber for your bands, strongly I do.” Then he gave a hearty laugh, Sequence took off; and as she did, the genie called out: “I’ll be back. If I see your light on, I might drop in.”