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SLOW DJINN

by Mack Reynolds

When the fog finally rolled out, I opened one eye — not very wide and looked around.

"Oh, *cut*," I winced, "the drunk tank again."

I opened the other eye. My sole fellow occupants were a sour looking tycoon type and one of the biggest and fattest characters I've ever seen. This second one must have been pushing seven feet and three hundred and fifty pounds. I needed a drink but bad. I squinted down at my wrist to find out how long I had to wait until morning. No watch. I'd probably hocked it with some bartender.

"Hey, buddy," I said to the dopey one, "what time is it?"

"Dhhhh?" he dhhhhhed.

The banker type said, "It is exactly ten minutes past two." He had a voice like Clifton Webb. He added, "Hassel can't tell time."

"Hassel?" I said. I looked at the big slob again. I had noticed his bulk before, his face wasn't any more impressive. It was dark and his bedraggled mustache mustulating.

He had been a good foot from tip to tip. Nobody would have accused him of having a spark of intelligence in his eye. Orson Welles cast as Pancho Villa in one of those Preston Sturges' comedies.

It was a long time until morning and another drink. I doubted it I'd make it. I fumbled a pack of Camels from somewhere or other, managed to get one out and into my face, and then extended the pack shakily. "Have one," I said.

The pile of blubber took one, examined it lackadastically, noticed I had mine in my mouth, stuck his in his mouth and ate it.

I don't have enough troubles — four months behind on my current assignment, and in a slump — I have to be put in a drunk tank with a giant who's got a jumping case of D.T.'s.

The banker type said, "He's a gin."

I looked back at Hassel. "You're telling me," I grunted.

The banker's eye became calculating. He said, "My name is

Benjamin Morley Dempsey." He waited as though that should ring up the curtain. It didn't.

"I'm Jake O'Gara," I said.

"Same name as the movie writer, eh?"

"Yeah."

He came over to me. "Look here, my man, you seem an intelligent type," he buttered. "Would you like to be let in on a good thing?"

"No," I told him. "I'm just in the process of getting out of a good thing. Tossed out. What're you doing in here? You look sober as a Salvation Army Major at a W. C. T. U. meeting."

"Ha ha," he said needlessly. "As a matter of fact, Mr. O'Gara, I am quite sober. This situation is due to an unfortunate misunderstanding."

My head was spinning like a whirling dervish in a revolving door, but I said, "Yeah, me too, probably. If I could remember." I motioned to Hassel with my still unlit cigarette. "Him too?"

Benjamin Morley Dempsey cleared his throat. "The same mistake, as a matter of fact. Hassel is in the way of being a servant of mine. He, ah, misunderstood my instructions."

"What's this good thing?" I asked him, managing to strike a match and even, eventually, to get the flame to the end of my cigarette. I took a deep drag on the cigarette, then took it out of my mouth and stared at it in hurt

surprise. It tasted as though I was burning soft coal.

Dempsey cleared his throat again. "I'll be glad to turn Hassel over to you."

I started to put the cigarette back in my mouth, stopped when it was half way there and did one of those classic double-takes like Tom the cat does in the Tom and Jerry cartoons. "That's the good thing you want to let me in on?" I said. "I should take over Hassel?"

"He's a servant," he said stubbornly.

I looked at Hassel again, closed my eyes in pain. He was standing near the bars happily flipping his lower lip with a dirty forefinger and making charming blubblubblubblub sounds.

"What's he like when he's sober?" I asked. "And why in the name of the last fadeout should I be interested in taking him off your hands? Why don't you turn him over to a nut factory?"

"A servant with unusual powers, as a matter of fact," He cleared his throat as though the saying of the last had hurt. "He's quite sober right now."

"I'd hate to see him drunk."

He shuddered. "So would I."

I threw away the cigarette and stretched back on my bunk, groaning. "Some other time," I told him. "Some other time I'll take him off your hands. Maybe sometime when I'm not swacked. I



have too much sense when I'm drunk."

"See here . . ." he said, and there was an edge of desperation in his voice.

"Go away," I said, "I'm hanging over."

"Your fine in the morning," he said. "Do you have sufficient funds to negotiate your release?"

Oh, oh.

I swung my feet around to the floor, sat up and investigated my pockets. Two dimes, three cents and a bus token. And judges don't take checks.

I looked up at him wearily. "Listen," I said, "what's your proposition?"

* * *

There was a half-block-long limousine waiting for Dempsey when we blinked ourselves out into the morning sun the next A.M. I knew I'd typed him right. He probably owned a chain of drive-in banks or something.

He managed to finagle Hassel into the front seat next to the chauffeur and we two climbed into the back.

"Where are we going?" I asked him. "I've got business to attend to." The business was getting another jug for myself as soon as possible. I had no intentions of tapering off at this stage of the game.

He took in my clothes which I'd slept in for the past three or four nights. I must have looked like I felt, and I felt like I'd been

sleeping in my clothes for the past three or four nights.

He said, "I'll bet you have," nastily. "We're going to my place to pick up Hassel's, ah, belongings. Now that you've had your fine paid, I expect to hold you to your pledge."

"Listen," I said. "All I said was that I'd take him on as a servant. If I don't like him, don't kid yourself, I'll fire him. You haven't got a pint in the glove compartment, have you?"

"No," he said. And, "It's not as simple as all that."

I was feeling too lousy to find out what that meant and we didn't say anything more until we reached his place just outside of Pasadena.

The driveway was two city blocks long, the trees looked like they'd been planted three hundred years ago and the house was king-size. A footman came to open the car door for us.

"Some layout," I said. "Former set, or something?"

We went up a stairway that made me feel as though I was climbing one of those Mexican pyramids, through a well-rugged, well-chandeliered hall and on into a study.

The study was a lulu. Arabian motif. You know, scimitars crossed on the walls, models of dhows complete with triangle sails. That sort of thing.

"Omar Khayyam slept here," I muttered.

"What was that?"

"Nothing," I told him. "Where're these belongings of Hassel's? I'm dying on the vine." I spotted a built-in bar and went over to it and poured myself a long, long bourbon and got it down without strain.

"Here," Dempsey said, "You'd better take it. I don't know what might happen if he carried it — and lost it."

I turned around. He was holding a gallon size, battered bronze jug toward me.

"What's that?" I growled.

"Hassel's bottle," he said. "Here, take it."

I took it and looked at him for a long moment.

He said, uncomfortably, "I told you. You evidently didn't believe me. He's a gin. It took me twenty years to locate that bottle, as a matter of fact." He waved vaguely at the books on the shelves — some of them looked like museum pieces. "Practically a lifetime's work."

I set the bronze jug down on the bar and poured myself another quick whiskey. "Do you mean *djinn*?" I said, and took the drink down in one swoop.

"That's what I said. Probably the very last, as a matter of fact."

I turned around and looked at Hassel. "He looks it." I played it straight. "Where'd you get him?"

"Alexandria, finally. I traced the bottle from Abacar to Smyrna,

from Smyrna to Istanbul. From Istanbul . . ."

"Okay," I said. I was feeling better after the two shots. "So you found the bottle and he's a djinn. Wait a minute while I remember about djinns."

"Not here," he said. "Do you remembering somewhere else. All you have to know is that the bottle is his badge of servitude. If he gives you any trouble just order him back into it."

"Well, wait a minute," I told him. "How do I know he'll take orders from me?"

Dempsey turned to Hassel and got off this line of fruity dialogue. "Hassel," he said sternly, "I am your master, but now I give you to this *effendi*. His words shall be your command. In return for release from the bottle, you shall remain his servant forevermore."

"Dhhhh," Hassel dhed.

Dempsey turned back to me. "You have the bottle," he said, "his badge of servitude and enslavement. The responsibility is yours."

That made about as much sense as a walrus in a goldfish bowl. "Listen," I said. "I'm beginning to think *I'm* sober and everybody else is drunk."

He'd evidently rung a bell or something. A butler and a footman entered behind us. "James," he said. "Show these two, ah, gentlemen out. Have Wilbur take them to their destination in the Bentley."

"You don't have to get temperamental about it," I said, pouring and downing a quick one.

• • •

The effects of the bourbon were beginning to wear off by the time we got to my place in North Hollywood. Wilbur, the chauffeur, let us out and we — me with the bronze jug under my arm — made our way up the driveway to the house.

"There's probably nobody here," I growled at Hassel. "Quit because I haven't paid them for two weeks."

"Dhhh," Hassel dhhhhed.

I tossed the bronze jug onto a couch and began investigating my bottles. I should have known better, they were as empty as an extra's brainpan.

This was strictly guano for the condors.

I turned to Hassel and growled, "So you're a djinn, eh? Okay, get me a drink, in fact a whole bottle."

"Dhhh?" he dhhhed.

"Some djinn," I said bitterly. "Damn it, you're supposed to be a servant, aren't you? Go scare me up a drink somewhere."

POP. He was gone.

I blinked at the place he'd been standing. "Oh, *cut*," I swore. "I've got to get off this stuff."

POP. He was back, a leather container in his hand. It swished as he moved.

"I'll be suspended," I blurted, but I grabbed for the leather

bottle. Let first things come first.

I pulled the wooden cork and applied myself to the contents. Brother, believe me, I needed it *bad*.

I must have got a half pint down before the suspicion began to dawn that I didn't want to drink this.

I pulled the neck of the bottle from my mouth and tried to spray what was left in my gullet about the room.

"WOW!" I yowled, my mouth burning like a tourist's at a Mexican chili-eating contest. I hopped around doing my best to exhale for a full straight five minutes without having to inhale.

I wound up finally at the bar, managed to pour myself a glass of water and to get it down.

"What was that?" I yelled at him.

"Dhhh?" he dhhhed.

"What was that?" I yelled. "Maybe I need an antidote!"

He thought about it. Finally, "Dhhh. Even fig wine, master. With resin added for potency, master."

"Resin! It's taken the enamel off my teeth! It's flattened both my arches! It's . . ."

Suddenly the significance of the situation hit me. I tracked from Hassel to the leather bottle then cut to the bronze jug. Back again to Hassel.

"No," I said. Then, a full minute later, "Let's see you do it."

"Dhhhh?"

"Listen, stupid, let's see you get into that bronze bottle."

His face went pathetic even though its blubber and grease. He looked down at the floor and rubbed the toe of a pointed slipper around and around in a circle. His lower lip went out in a pout.

"Into the bottle," I said sternly.

You'll never believe this, but right there and then he began to go smoky. Thick, thick smoke, and then, slowly, the smoke began to drift over the mouth of the bronze jug. Walt Disney couldn't have had it done better.

Before I could get over the fact that he'd managed to change into smoke, he began to flow down into that bottle. In a matter of a minute there wasn't a sign of him left.

I picked up the jug and shook it. It didn't even rattle. I looked down into it.

"You in there?" I called.

"Dhhhh."

He was in there all right, all right.

"Come on out," I told him. "I gotta think about this."

I put the jug down on the floor and the smoke began to ooze out again. Two minutes later there he was, solid.

"That's quite a trick," I admitted. "I know an agent who could book you solid for . . ." I dropped that line in mid sentence. For all I knew he might have gone and looked the guy up. I figured I knew a good thing when I saw it.

I sat and looked at him, one eye closed to get a better focus, and tried to figure it out. I was rocked, see. If I hadn't already been squiffed, I'd never been able to take it. It was worse than that job at Warner's back when I was scripting the Zombi series.

Finally I said, "Listen, Hassel, how the hell did you get into that bottle?"

"Dhhhh?" he dhhhed.

"How'd you get into that bottle in the first place?"

He thought about it for a while and you could see the thinking hurt. He moved his lips in and out a few times like Edward Arnold playing Nero Wolfe. I thought he was about to say something, but then the effort proved too much, his eyes hit a new low in brilliance and he said, "Dhhh?"

I gave up that angle. "Listen," I said, "let's get this straight. I'm your master, eh? You do whatever I tell you to."

"Dhhhh?"

"You have to do whatever I tell you."

He looked at me as though I was an idiot. *Anybody* knew that.

"Like if I wanted you to go out and get me a flock of beautiful dames, you'd do it?"

He brightened expectantly.

"Hey, wait a minute," I said hurriedly. "Cancel that one. There's already more dizzy starlets and extras trying to get into my swimming pool than I can shake a stick at."

"Dhhh?" he dhhhed.

"No dames," I said. "How about gold? Could you pile a ton of gold up here in my playroom?"

POP. He was gone.

POP. He was back and with him a tremendous pile of yellow ingots.

And POP the floor gave way beneath the weight and we stood there looking down into the cellar where the gold mixed in with the wreckage of my hardwood floor.

"Come to think of it," I said bitterly, "gold isn't legal exchange in this country anymore. In fact, it seems to me the federal authorities take a dim view of anybody having a lot of the stuff around without being able to tell where it came from. You better get rid of that gold, Hassel."

"Dhhhh?"

"Get rid of that damn gold that just broke my floor through!"

POP. It was gone.

"And fix the floor."

POP. He was gone.

POP. He was back, carrying a prehistoric looking saw, a bronze-headed hammer and a handful of cut nails. He blinked dismally at the wreckage. On the face of it, the boy hated to work.

"Come on, come on," I said.

He got under way slowly, something like an elephant stampede, but his acceleration was a geometric progression. It took him a whole minute to drive the first nail but he drove two the second

minute and four the third. So help me, in ten minutes time he was driving them with the speed of bullets spewing out of a sub-machine gun. If there'd been a house to build, he'd have had it finished in half an hour.

When he was finished, I took him into my study, sat down in an easy chair and stared at him. I wished that my head was in better shape. What in the name of the final fadeout were you supposed to get a djinn to do for you? A flying carpet? I thought about that and decided to stick to the airlines.

A tremendous palace?

I looked around my place and decided that twelve rooms and a swimming pool was hard enough to keep up, help being what it was these days. A palace was out.

I looked back at Hassel.

"Listen," I said. "I've changed my mind about the dancing girls, but I don't want a whole bevy of them. I want the *one* most beautiful girl in the world brought here."

"Dhhh?"

"Bring me the single most beautiful girl in the world.

POP. He was gone.

POP. He was back. Not alone.

With him he had a good two hundred and fifty pounds of dancing girl. I could tell she was a dancing girl by the clothes. Thank the patron saint of the flickers that I never had to watch her dance.

Hassel beamed. At least that's how I interpreted the shift of the blood in his eyes from crimson to a purplish red.

She simpered and lowered her eyes demurely.

I said, "*This* is your idea of the most beautiful girl in . . ." I broke it off. "Listen," I said, "get her out of here. That's an order!"

POP. And they were gone.

I sat and thought about it until he returned. He was gone a good half hour.

POP. He was back.

I looked at him suspiciously. "What took you so long?"

"Dhhh?" he dhhhed, looking like a cat who'd just eaten the canary.

"Never mind," I said hurriedly.

I went over to the telephone and took it up and rang the studio.

"Molly," I said, "this is Jake. Let me talk to J. D. . . . No, listen, it's something important. He'll want to hear what I've got."

I held the phone for a minute or so, then, "Hello, J.D.?"

Listen, this is Jake. You'll never believe what I'm about to tell you . . . No, listen, J. D. I've got my hands on a djinn . . . No, djinn. D-J-I-N-N . . . Listen, J. D. cool down. Have you ever considered doing, say, an Arabian Nights production *with a real djinn?* . . . I'm telling you J. D. I'm not especially drunk. I'm dead serious . . . Where'd I get him? Listen, J. D. you'll never

believe this, but I was in the drunk tank last night and . . . Hey! J. D.!"

I threw the phone back into its cradle.

"I'll show them," I snapped.

I whirled on Hassel. "Okay, stupid. I want you to go and get me a shooting script of the best South Sea Island movie possible. And make it quick. I don't want you wasting any time around that two-ton dancing girl, wherever you've got her stashed."

POP. He was gone.

POP. He was back, clean white manuscript in hand.

"Hassel," I said, leafing through it quickly, "this is absolutely the tops, eh?"

"Dhhhhh?" he dhhhed.

"Never mind," I said.

He wandered over to the fish-bowl, suddenly snaked a hand down into the water, pulled out a goldfish and flipped it into his gullet.

"Cut that out," I yelled at him. Then, under my breath, "College-boy type."

I went over to the typewriter and sat down, whipped a sheet of paper into it and batted off a title page with my name on it. "This'll show 'em," I muttered. I typed up a quick note. *Here's the South Sea script. Sorry I took so long on it,* signed it Jake and clipped it to the manuscript.

I handed it back to Hassel. "I want this delivered immediately to the desk of Preston Hecht."

"Dhhh?"

"Preston Hecht. Miracle Studios. They have that big neon sign over the building. *If It's A Good Picture It's A Miracle.*"

POP. He was gone.

POP. He was back.

"Okay," I told him. "Sit back and relax. All I got to do now is wait for a phone call. Old J. D.'ll be on his knees when he sees that script."

I remembered a bottle of stone age cognac that somebody'd given me the Christmas before and I'd stashed away in the cellar for some great occasion. Obviously, this was it.

I made my way down to the cellar, dug it out of its hiding place and returned to the study.

Hassel was sitting in a corner, his slippers off and counting his toes. When he'd get to eleven, he'd scowl and start over again.

I poured myself a stiff one and toasted my good luck.

After a while I said, "I wonder why Dempsey was willing to give you up. He didn't hit me as the philanthropist type."

" . . . thirteen. Dhhhh?" he dhhhed.

"Never mind," I told him.

The phone rang. I picked it up and said, curtly, "Jake O'Gara speaking."

"O'Gara." It was J. D.'s voice. "Preston Hecht has just brought me that script you turned over for the South Sea assignment you've been working on for the past four

months."

"Yes, chief?" I said modestly.

He said, very slowly, "O'Gara, it's a wonderful script. Off hand, I'd say it was the best shooting script I've ever seen for a South Sea production. Certainly the best with your name on it."

"Well, thanks, J.D." I said. "I thought you'd like it." I beamed across the room at Hassel who was counting his fingers now. He seemed to have a thumb left over.

"Only one trouble, O'Gara," J. D.'s voice seemed to have altered in tone just slightly.

I said, "Maybe a touch of re-write, a bit of doctoring."

"O'Gara," J. D.'s voice was beginning to go shrill. "Where'd you get the idea you could palm off an old Somerset Maugham *Rain* script on me? You're fired, get me! Blackballed, you drunken bum. If you ever get a job in any studio in this . . ."

I hung up wearily and turned to Hassel.

"Dhhh?" he dhhhed.

"I told you to get me the best possible South Sea Island . . ." I cut it short, stared at him, probably unblinking for a full five minutes.

I picked up the phone book and looked up the number of Benjamin Morley Dempsey. I dialed it.

Dempsey himself answered. He had probably been expecting the call.

I said, "This is Jake O'Gara,

the guy you foisted this stupid jerk off on. Get this, Dempsey, I'm sending him back."

His voice was oily. "I'm afraid not, O'Gara."

"I'm booting him out, right now, see? Bronze jug and all! You know what that guy's done to me in the past three hours?"

"Don't tell me your troubles, O'Gara. I've got my own. Just remember that I had him on my hands for more than a week. You realize why he's the last of the djinn, don't you? All the rest of them managed to out-smart themselves one way or the other. Not Hassel! He couldn't out-smart anybody, not even himself."

"Well, out he goes."

"O'Gara, you took him in good faith. In return for services rendered on my part, you took over my responsibility. Remember? You've got him for the rest of your life."

"Yeah?" I snarled. "At the rate we're going, that wouldn't be long. What's stopping me from tossing him out on his . . . ear?"

Have you ever heard a shudder come over a telephone wire?

He said, "Don't try it, O'Gara. I'm telling you. He's bound to you now, understand. As long as he's bound to you — or to any human being — we're safe."

I grabbed up the cognac bottle and took a long quick one, then snapped into the phone. "This is getting crazier by the minute. What'd'ya mean *we're safe*? Any-

body around this jerk is about as safe as an H-Bomb juggler. You tell this character to bring some wood for the fireplace and he'd probably tear off the roof to get it."

He said, very slowly, "Among other things, O'Gara, if you freed him of his servitude he would probably go off and take a wife. It's been a long time, you know."

"Well, so what," I argued. "Let him have a wife. Matter of fact, he's already got a girl friend and . . ."

There was an edge of panic in his voice. "O'Gara! You can't mean that! To my knowledge, he's the last djinn on Earth. You want to set him breeding again?"

He got me that time. Quietly, I hung up the phone.

This was strictly fertilizer for the aviary.

I turned to the halfwit *efrit*. "Hassel," I said.

"Dhhhh?"

"The worm is beginning to turn." I was coming to a slow boil inside. He looked down at the floor to see what worm I was talking about.

I sank back onto the sofa, cognac bottle in hand and glared at him accusingly. "There's some answer to this," I told him. "It's been happening all down through the ages and it's gotta stop."

"Dhhhh," he agreed hopefully.

"The djinn," I said. "Always we get trouble from the djinn. Not even Solomon could get any-

where with you. He finally wound up tossing those that were left into bronze bottles and into the sea."

This was getting too intellectual for Hassel. He sank to the floor, crossed his legs and began catching fleas, or whatever, out of the matted jungle of his chest.

"But," I went on, taking another pull at my cognac, "if a good Hollywood situation man can't figure this out, it can't be figured. Now then, what's the basic story idea? We got a guy with a djinn, the slowest djinn ever to come out of a bottle. Fine, no matter what the guy orders the djinn to do, the order is loused up."

I enumerated on my fingers. "I ask for liquor, I get fig wine complete with resin. I ask for a beautiful dame, I get a two-ton dancing girl — by the way, stay away from that babe from now on, understand, that's an order. I ask for a ton of gold and before I remember that it'd be hard to explain to the authorities it breaks my floor through. I ask for a movie script and wind up with my job gone and me blacklisted."

Hassel didn't want to be left completely out of the conversation, he said, "Dhhh?"

I wagged a finger at him. "There must be some solution, something I could cash in on. The only thing you've done right for me so far . . ."

• • •

"Yes, sir, Mr. DeMille," I said, "we can do the job for you. As you say, there's no use moving your whole company clear over to Palestine for some decent Holy Land type background. *O'Gara and Hassel* specialize in this type of contracting. We'll tunnel through the Pacific and fill up Death Valley for you. Look just like the Sea of Galilee when we're through. Might have to move a couple of mountains, but that's incidental. The time involved? Just a minute, I'll figure it out."

I put down the telephone and picked up a pencil and slide rule. I figured rapidly, one shovel full of dirt the first minute, two the second, four the third . . .

I picked up the phone again. "Mr. DeMille, we'll be able to dig a tunnel from the Pacific to Death Valley for you in approximately two hours, give or take a few minutes."

I interrupted his agitated answer with a calm dignity. "If you wish, sir, you might check with John Ford. Just last week, *O'Gara and Hassel* moved the Egyptian Pyramids over to the Mohave Desert for him."

I put down the telephone and looked across my half acre desk to the other side of the room where Hassel squatted in the corner.

"Hassel," I said.

"Dhhhh?"

"Get your shovel, we have a new contracting job."