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Opening extract from

# The Land of Green Ginger

Written by

**Noel Langley**

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# The Land of Green Ginger

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ILLUSTRATED BY EDWARD ARDIZZONE

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# *Chapter the First*

## *Which Explains How, Why, When, and Where There Was Ever Any Problem in the First Place*

*May fortune preserve you, Gentle Reader. May* your days be filled with constant joys, and may my story please you, for it has no other purpose.

And now, if you are ready to begin, I bring you a tale of heroes and villains, just as in life; birds and beasts, just as in zoos; mysteries and magic, just as in daydreams; and the wonderful wanderings of an enchanted land which was never in the same place twice.

As long ago as long ago, and as long ago again as that, the city of Peking in the ancient land of China rang with jubilation and rejoicing; for a son and heir had been born to the Emperor Aladdin and the Empress Bedr-el-Budur; the lily whose glad renown I have no need to gild.

To commemorate the auspicious occasion, the Emperor Aladdin had announced a firework display in the palace park, and ordered elegant paper flags, cut in the shapes of golden birds and fishes, to be given to the people of Peking. When these were waved in every available inch of the crowded street, the sight was quite enchanting.

On a more serious note, the Grand Vizier summoned a special meeting of state in the White Lacquer Room of the Imperial Palace.

You may judge for yourself the importance of this meeting, when I tell you that His Gracious Majesty the Emperor Aladdin presided over it himself. Others present included the Lord Chamberlain; the Prime Minister; two senior generals from the Palace Guard; the Master of the Horse; the Mistress of the Robes; and an unidentified friend of the Master of the Horse.

The Grand Vizier himself, having forgotten that he had called the special meeting, had gone to watch the fireworks display in the palace park instead; but, alas, though the display had been advertised to commence promptly at one hour after sunset, hitches

and vexations had arisen, and as yet the park was dark and silent.

He then remembered the special meeting, and arrived not only last, but a little out of breath from slipping on a mat in the ante-room.

Regaining his aplomb, he beat importantly on a dragon gong with an ivory wand, and everyone present nodded encouragingly to indicate their willingness to listen attentively to whatever he was going to say.

‘Your Majesty!’ began the Grand Vizier imposingly. ‘Also Lords and Ladies of the Imperial Court! Also the friend of the Master of the Horse. We are met here this evening to give formal voice to our humble and unworthy joy at the birth of a son and heir to our Celestial Emperor of all the Chinas –’

Here everyone present rose dutifully and bowed to the Emperor Aladdin, and seated themselves again.

‘– and to offer our ridiculous and ineffectual assistance in deciding what name or names shall be given to the said son and heir of our Celestial Emperor of all the Chinas –’

Here everyone present rose and bowed to the Emperor Aladdin and seated themselves again; causing the Emperor Aladdin to address them personally.

‘Henceforth,’ he said considerately, ‘you may dispense with the ceremony of rising and bowing at the mention of my name, or we’ll never finish this special meeting, and I am naturally anxious not to miss the fireworks which, after all, I paid for. You may proceed, Grand Vizier.’

‘Thank you, Your Majesty,’ said the Grand Vizier. ‘To proceed,’ he proceeded, ‘I cannot stress the importance of the solemn duty which is ours. It is a duty, I think I may safely say, which the whole of China looks to us to bear honourably, shoulder to shoulder, one for all and all for one, and long live the Emperor of all the Chinas –’

Whereupon everyone present rose and bowed to the Emperor Aladdin, and then remembered that he had specifically asked them not to, and seated themselves hurriedly, feeling slightly foolish.

‘I said I could not stress the importance of the solemn duty which is ours,’ continued the Grand Vizier, ‘and it’s quite true. I can’t. But that’s life. You have each been given,’ he said, ‘a piece of paper and a pencil –’

The Lord Chamberlain raised his hand.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he said imposingly, ‘but by some pardonable error I have been given no pencil.’

‘You have *each* been given,’ said the Grand Vizier in a sharper voice, ‘a piece of paper and a pencil. On the piece of paper, with the pencil, you will write –’

‘No pencil,’ said the Lord Chamberlain clearly and distinctly.

‘Order, order,’ murmured the Master of the Horse reproachfully.

‘*On* the piece of paper, *with* the pencil,’ said the Grand Vizier very sharply indeed, ‘you will write five names for the heir apparent to the throne, all of which must be suitable, dignified, and poetic. The papers will then be collected and handed to the Emperor, who will decide which name he likes best. A word of caution,’ he added gravely. ‘I depend on you not to peep at each other’s pieces of paper. Anyone found doing this will have his piece of paper torn up, and will not be allowed to watch the fireworks.

‘The winner will be awarded the Empress’s clockwork nightingale, which can sing three songs flawlessly, once a few minor repairs have been made. The consolation prize is a ride once around the palace on an elephant.’

‘No pencil,’ said the Lord Chamberlain, pathetic now.

The Master of the Horse, who was kinder than

some I could mention, broke his pencil in two and gave the Lord Chamberlain the blunt half, and silence fell as everybody present began to think of five suitable, dignified, and poetic names.

Everybody present sat, and they thought, and they thought very hard, frowning now at the floor, and now at the ceiling, and occasionally at the Emperor Aladdin, though not intentionally; but no one seemed able to think of any names at all, except useless ones like *Tea-Pot* and *Bird's Nest Soup.*

Time went by, and the Emperor Aladdin began peering over his shoulder at the window, in case the fireworks started without him; and the special

meeting began to feel desperate at not being able to think of five suitable, dignified, and poetic names.

At last the silence was broken by the Lord Chamberlain, who suddenly said: '*Ah!*' very excitedly and sucked his pencil and got his piece of paper ready, and everyone present looked at him with envy, and thought to themselves how much they had always loathed the Lord Chamberlain.

The moment he put his pencil to the piece of paper, however, the name he had thought of vanished into thin air; but, as everyone was looking at him, and he had to write *something*, he wrote 'Lord Chamberlain' in curly capitals: hoping to cross it out later, unobserved.

Another silence fell, and the Master of the Horse rose and made his cushion more comfortable and seated himself again; but even so, the only names he could think of were the names of horses, which were almost as unsuitable as *Tea-Pot* and *Bird's Nest Soup.*

From where the Emperor Aladdin sat on the throne, he could see all the pieces of paper, and the Lord Chamberlain's was the only one with any

words on it (and those were crossed out); so at last his impatience got the better of him, and he rose and said with frigid politeness:

'If it will not disturb your train of thought, I shall excuse myself and retire to the balcony, as I think I heard a bang.'

Everyone present rose and bowed while he departed for the balcony, and then reseated themselves, and the Lord Chamberlain rather forlornly wrote 'Bang' on his piece of paper, then thought better of it, and drew little faces down the side instead, to help him concentrate.

Out on the balcony, the Emperor Aladdin discovered that the hitches and vexations were still delaying the fireworks, and he was about to return to the special meeting, when the Queen Mother, the Honourable Widow Twankey, found him.

'Ah, *there* you are!' she cried very loudly, seizing him by the sleeve. 'My pearl-encrusted snuffbox, Aladdin! That *son* of yours! My sapphire tiara! What a child!'

'There's no use to bellow, mamma,' Aladdin told

her kindly, trying to pull his sleeve free. 'We all *know* how happy you are about it –'

'Happy?' echoed the Widow Twankey, unamused. '*Happy?* When your son has just called me, *me,* the Queen Mother, a button-nosed tortoise?'

'Tut! Calm yourself, mamma,' Aladdin soothed her. 'A day-old baby doesn't talk!'

'I *know* it doesn't!' replied the Widow Twankey loudly. 'And I know how old my grandson is, to the minute; but he *still* called me a button-nosed tortoise! So don't just *stand* there, Aladdin! *Do* something!'

The Emperor controlled an impulse to say, 'Do

what?' or 'Such as?', and proceeded to the Yellow Lacquer Nurseries. There he found his son and heir gazing at his foot, which he held near his nose with both hands.

He bent over the cradle and waved his fingers.

'Hootchie-cootchie, my itsywitsy!' said the Emperor Aladdin indulgently. 'Did his grandma say de Emperor's own handsome itty melon-flower could talk? Tum on den, talk to oo papa!'

The son and heir lowered his foot and gazed up at the Emperor Aladdin attentively for a moment.

'Certainly!' he replied good-naturedly. 'Hootchie-cootchie to you, too! Twice.'

'Dere's a clever itty boo!' said the Emperor Aladdin, much gratified, and then sat down quickly on a nearby chair and opened and shut his mouth in a very dazed manner.

'*Now* do you believe me?' asked the Widow Twankey with gloomy satisfaction.

The Emperor Aladdin rallied himself, and gazed at his son and heir with as much dignity as he could muster.

‘I understand you called the Queen Mother a button-nosed tortoise?’ he inquired.

‘That’s not quite true,’ replied his son and heir politely. ‘I only said she had a face like one.’

‘He only said you had a face like one, mamma,’ Aladdin explained weakly.

‘And what right had he to say even that?’ demanded the Widow Twankey indignantly. ‘Even if there *were* such a thing as a button-nosed tortoise; *he* hasn’t seen one!’

‘True,’ agreed the son and heir, ‘but I’d know one if I *did* see one!’

‘How?’ the Widow Twankey challenged him.

‘It’d look like you,’ said the son and heir simply.

‘Aladdin! I refuse to be insulted! Do something!’ ordered the Widow Twankey angrily.

The Emperor Aladdin looked twice as helpless as he had before.

‘Do what?’ he asked. ‘Such as? I’m completely at a loss! Out of all the thousands and *thousands* of expectant fathers in Peking, why did this have to happen to me?’

‘Maybe the stork brought me to the wrong palace?’ suggested his son and heir apologetically.

‘I didn’t mean to sound unfatherly,’ the Emperor Aladdin floundered kind-heartedly. ‘It’s just that – it’s simply that – what I mean is,’ he explained, ‘it doesn’t *happen*! It’s not *possible*! You can’t talk at your age! That’s all there is to it!’

‘Ah, I begin to grasp the problem!’ said the son and heir, looking suitably pensive. ‘It clearly calls for careful thinking on everybody’s part.’

‘It’s obviously an enchantment, or a wicked spell, or both, or worse!’ declared the Widow Twankey darkly. ‘My ormolu ear-rings! I know what’s happened, Aladdin! Your wicked uncle Abanazar is back in town!’

‘No, mamma,’ said the Emperor Aladdin. ‘Our spies, who are everywhere, would have informed us. He’s *miles* away in Persia, where we banished him.’

‘Which side of the family is wicked uncle Abanazar?’ asked the son and heir, intrigued. ‘And does *he* have a face like a button-nosed tortoise, too?’

‘That’ll be enough from you!’ the Widow Twankey

warned him, growing red. 'I can stand just so much!'

'The wisest move that *I* can think of,' said the Emperor Aladdin, 'is to ask Abdul *his* opinion.'

'What? Abdul? Never!' cried the Widow Twankey in alarm. 'When you gave him his freedom, you promised him you never would rub that lamp again!'

'Who is Abdul?' asked the son and heir, with cordial interest. 'Another member of the family?'

'No. He's the slave of the lamp,' said the Emperor Aladdin. 'But you wouldn't know about the lamp. When I was but a boy, my wicked uncle Abanazar sent me down into a cave to find it, and then he sealed me up there. In my alarm, I chanced to rub the lamp by accident, and Abdul appeared and told me I had but to command and he would obey. Well, to cut a long story short, I took him at his word, and that, my child, was how I met your mother. While it's perfectly true that I promised him I wouldn't use the lamp again, once I gave him his freedom; I'm sure he'll understand that, faced with an emergency such as this, I really had no other choice!'

He clapped his hands for a Lady-in-Waiting who

was conveniently listening just outside the door.

'Kindly bring the lamp,' he ordered her rather grandly, being nervous, 'and be careful not to let it rub against anything on the way.'

'I'll be *sure* not to!' said the Lady-in-Waiting with heart-felt sincerity.

'Of course, it may not even work any more,' he said as the Lady-in-Waiting departed, wearing her uneasiest expression, 'but, if anyone'll know what to do, Abdul will! Good old Abdul!' he added in a wavery attempt to sound confident and optimistic.

'Never say I didn't warn you!' said the Widow Twankey ominously. 'If he takes it the wrong way, and creates an ugly scene, I shall *not* be party to it!'

The Lady-in-Waiting came back with the lamp at arm's length on a cushion, and as soon as the Emperor Aladdin took it, she disappeared so fast it hardly seemed possible.

The Emperor Aladdin held up the lamp cautiously between his finger and thumb.

'Well, well, well,' he said slowly, looking at it from one end and then the other and, finally, sideways.

‘And to think I once handled it as casually as tap your top-knot!’

‘Well, *rub* the thing if you’re going to!’ snapped the Widow Twankey irritably. ‘Don’t just sit there twiddling it! Consider my nerves!’

‘Very well,’ said Aladdin. ‘Here we go; ready or not!’

‘I *still* hope he won’t come; but if he does, tell me when he’s gone! I’m not going to look!’ announced the Widow Twankey, putting her fingers in her ears and screwing her eyes tight shut. She looked so absurd that the son and heir was unable to repress a giggle.

The Emperor Aladdin glanced over at him in reproach.

‘I don’t think you ought to look, either,’ he advised him gravely. ‘Abdul’s hardly what you’d call handsome!’

‘Why, the uglier the better!’ said his son and heir cheerfully, leaning over the end of his cot. ‘Hurry up and rub the lamp, papa, unless you’re scared!’

The Emperor Aladdin stiffened.

‘For your particular information, I am not scared in the slightest!’ he said haughtily.

The Widow Twankey opened one eye.

‘You don’t mean you haven’t rubbed it *yet*?’ she demanded indignantly.

‘More haste, less speed,’ said the Emperor Aladdin, still ruffled. ‘There’s such a thing as correct procedure!’

‘Here! Let *me* do it!’ said the Widow Twankey impatiently, and snatched the lamp out of the Emperor’s hands. ‘Even if it’s only to prove that he’ll refuse to answer!’

She had no sooner brushed the lamp with her sleeve, however, when a loud clap of thunder resounded through the room. The Widow Twankey gave a shrill wail, flung the lamp in the air, dug her fingers back into her ears, and squeezed her eyes twice as tightly shut as before.

The Emperor Aladdin and his son and heir were too occupied to notice. They were watching the floor, which was slowly cracking open down the middle.

As the thunder died away, a large cloud of green

smoke rose up through the crack in the floor, and hovered imposingly in the middle of the room.

Then the floor closed together, leaving no sign of the crack, and slowly and impressively, Abdul's huge green saucer-eyes began to glow through the cloud like lamps.

His big bulbous nose appeared next, with a bright brass ring in it, and then his big wide mouth, with long white walrus tusks at either end, and then his carefully combed whiskers, and his glittering jade-

green earrings, then his tall turreted turquoise turban, and at last the rest of the green smoke cleared away, and he slowly came to rest on the floor.

'I am the slave of the lamp! Ask what thou wilt, and it shall be done!' he boomed in a voice like a hollow gong falling down a deep, dark well. 'And this is a fine time to ask it,' he added plaintively. 'I was in my bath!'

'Oh, dear! How inconvenient! But bath or no bath; it's delightful to see you again, my dear Abdul!' said the Emperor Aladdin ingratiatingly.

'Likewise,' said the djinn, unbending only slightly. 'What is your wish, Master?'

'I'm in urgent need of your advice,' said the Emperor Aladdin. 'Won't you sit down?'

Abdul shook his head.

'Don't you remember? I burn through chairs,' he said. 'Advice of what nature?'

'The problem concerns my son and heir,' said the Emperor Aladdin, pointing to the cot.

'Oho, so you're a father now?' said Abdul, studying the son and heir approvingly. 'My congratulations on

a fine, normal, healthy boy! How can *he* present a problem?'

'I talk,' said the son and heir pleasantly.

Abdul jerked his head up quickly.

'Who said that?' he asked suspiciously.

'Not I!' said the Emperor Aladdin wistfully. 'I wish it had been!'

'Then it was *you*!' said Abdul accusingly, turning to the Widow Twankey, a woman he had never liked; but it was apparent to him at once that he had wronged her, for she still had her fingers in her ears and her eyes tight shut.

'Odd!' said the djinn, and fixed a large green eye on the son and heir. 'Don't tell me it was *you*?' he asked flippantly, purely as a joke.

'No, no; of *course* it wasn't!'

'But it *was*,' said the son and heir cordially.

Abdul's eyebrows disappeared into his turban.

'He speaks quite fluently,' the Emperor Aladdin said apologetically. 'I was just going to tell you. That's why I rubbed the lamp. To ask you what to do!'

'The Widow Twankey is convinced it's a spell,' the

son and heir put in helpfully, 'but we think not.'

'It's certainly not an ordinary common-or-garden spell,' the djinn agreed slowly, having regained his usual aplomb. 'I don't remember having come across a case like this before . . . I have a son myself, in a quiet sort of way, but all *he* says is *boomalakka wee*.'

'Just *boomalakka wee*?' asked the Emperor Aladdin rather wistfully.

'Just *boomalakka wee*.'

'Not another word?'

'Not another word.'

The Emperor Aladdin sighed.

'You must be very proud of having a son who can only say *boomalakka wee*,' he said in a slightly envious voice.

The djinn, though slow-thinking, realized he had not been tactful.

'Well, yes; but then again, it *can* get monotonous,' he confessed. 'Though I'm not sure I'd want it any different; at least not until he's teethed. But about *your* boy, now. I'm just trying to remember something,' he added, screwing up one eye and tugging at a whisker

to help him concentrate. 'It's on the fork of my tongue! I must walk up and down!'

He walked up and down, burning four holes in a valuable carpet that lay in his path.

'*Ginger!*' he exclaimed suddenly, halting in front of Aladdin imposingly. 'Does that convey anything?'

'*Whiskers?*' suggested the Emperor Aladdin, hopefully.

'No,' said the djinn.

'*Cats?*'

'Warm.'

'*An edible seasoning?*'

'Warmer.'

'My mind is now a blank.'

'I have it!' cried the djinn, slapping his forehead so hard that green sparks flew in the air. 'The Land of Green Ginger! It all comes back to me now! The Land of Green Ginger,' proceeded the djinn impressively, 'was built by a magician who was very fond of flowers and vegetables. The idea was, that when he went travelling, he could take the Land of Green Ginger with him like a portable back-garden; only

fancier, if you follow me? The point is – something went wrong with the final spell. You know how it is? There's always that element of risk, even with the best incantations. Well, this final spell went wrong, and turned him into a button-nosed tortoise; and the poor man wasn't able to turn himself back!'

'Imagine that!' cried the son and heir and the Emperor Aladdin together, greatly enlightened.

'Proceed!' begged the Emperor, all ears.

'The rest of the spells worked perfectly,' Abdul proceeded, 'and while the magician was busy trying to turn himself back into a magician – which was, naturally, his immediate concern – the Land of Green Ginger suddenly rose in the air without so much as a by-your-leave, and floated off, on its own, away into nowhere!'

'Why didn't the magician make it fly back down again?' the son and heir inquired rather sensibly.

'If *you* were a button-nosed tortoise, would *you* be able to control a complicated thing like a flying-back-garden?' asked the djinn. 'Indeed you would *not*! And as nobody else knows how to control it, it just

floats wherever its fancy takes it, and lands wherever its fancy takes it, and floats away again whenever its fancy takes it. It's always where you'd *least* expect it to be. For example, a tired traveller might go to sleep on a wide flat desert, and wake up with his feet under a tree, and his head on a mushroom. That would give *anyone* cause for confusion, would it not?'

'It would indeed!' the Emperor Aladdin agreed. 'But how does all this concern my son and heir?'

'What were the first words he uttered?' returned the djinn. 'Don't tell me – I *know*! He said "button-nosed tortoise"! Am I right? I see by your face I'm right! Your son,' said the djinn impressively, 'is the one chosen to break the spell of the Land of Green Ginger, and restore the magician to his normal shape! It's all been foretold, you see – nothing has been left to chance. I can even tell you your son's name. It's Abu Ali!'

'Abu Ali?' repeated the son and heir experimentally. 'I *like* it!'

'I do too,' said the Emperor Aladdin.

'And how do I break the spell, and when?' asked

Abu Ali, quite willing to set about it there and then.

'When you come of age,' said Abdul.

At this point, the Widow Twankey's voice broke in on them.

'Aladdin!' she said. 'Has the obnoxious creature gone yet?' She still kept her fingers in her ears and her eyes tight shut.

'Long ago, mamma,' said the Emperor Aladdin, diplomatically. 'The only person with us now is dear old Abdul.'

Abdul fixed his glittering gaze on the Widow Twankey.

'You know, your mother always was a little *too* active,' he said thoughtfully. 'Wouldn't she be more valuable to collectors if she were to stay like that?'

'Now, now, Abdul! I know that sometimes she makes her presence felt; but, please do nothing foolhardy,' begged the Emperor Aladdin nervously. 'She really thinks most highly of *you*!'

'Yes! So I gathered,' said Abdul drily. 'However, my time is up, Master. I must leave now. Calm your fears. All is as it should be. Peace be with you! Going *down*!'

He stamped his foot. Instantly there was another rumble of thunder, the floor obligingly split open, and Abdul sank down into it.

Less than a moment later, there was nothing to show that he had ever been there, save for a faint swirl of green smoke which hovered in the air for a moment, and then wafted out of the window.

'Well, *now* we know the answer to the problem, and we can all relax!' said little Abu Ali with satisfaction, sitting back in his cot. 'I suppose you ought to tell the Queen Mother she can take her fingers out of her ears, papa!'

The Emperor Aladdin turned to the Widow Twankey.

'Abdul's gone, mamma!' he said cheerfully. 'You can look now!'

But the Widow Twankey continued to keep her eyes tight shut and her fingers in her ears.

'Mamma!' said the Emperor Aladdin in a louder voice, tapping her with his fan. 'He's gone!'

They waited. But the Widow Twankey never so much as twitched.

‘Give her a push, papa,’ Abu Ali suggested helpfully. ‘Just a *small* one, to begin with.’

The Emperor Aladdin gave the Widow Twankey a *small* push, and all she did was to rock gently on her feet, and then come to rest again in exactly the same position.

Little Abu Ali’s face broke into a grateful smile.

‘*Kind* old Abdul!’ he said happily. ‘He’s arranged it so she *will* stay like that!’

Yes, indeed, Gentle Reader, Abdul had done exactly that!

What more impressive way to end a chapter?