The Logic of Magic

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THE OLD MAGICIAN got up from his pallet, glad to see the dawn at last. He had slept poorly. The fire in his belly had waked him several times and the poppy-honey had not relieved his pain. His mouth was dry; the water in the jar was flat and warm. He opened the door curtain and looked out at the empty square around which the other huts were huddled. He noticed that several other curtains were pulled aside.

He turned back into the hut, sick with his pain and sicker with his anger. As he walked over to wake the Young Magician, he swept his Guardian down from its niche and kicked it. What was the use of a Guardian if the magic in it was worn out? He was angry not that he was soon to die—all men die, but that he was to die before he was sure that the Young Magician could protect the People. Today was the second day of the marriage festivities, and he knew that the Young Magician felt that the old one was too querulous, that the young man would be bored and let his attention wander while they sat before the Men’s House. The mid-summer sun would be hot, and the fire in him would get worse.

He nudged the Young Magician. “Get up. It is dawn. The young men and the husbands are beginning to gather.”

The Young Magician jumped up. “There was much berry wine last night. I slept and had no dreams.”

The old man grunted as he drank water and nibbled at a bean cake. “Make all ready. Put on the board the Honorary Mother’s bean cake and the water jug and the honey.” And he went out as the young man took the magic bundle from the ring of salt that had watched it overnight.

The Bridegroom and his three age-brothers, surrounded by laughing men, were gathered in the center of the square. They wore the ceremonial
feather-and-straw skirts, and their heavily oiled hair was neatly braided and bound around their heads. When they saw the magicians approach, they hurried to make the proper order for the march. The Old Magician took a pinch of dust from the ground, threw it into the air, and closed his eyes. Then they proceeded to walk to the Men's House at the edge of the forest. The Bridegroom and his age-brothers followed the magicians, jesting about the approaching end of their bachelordom and reminiscing about their initiation two years before; then came the husbands, laughing at the young men; and then came the groups of recent initiates and sub-initiates. The women could be heard giggling in their huts, but not even a child dared to come out until all the men had passed by.

They were halfway to the Men's House when the Old Magician suddenly realized that the Young Magician had not brought the Bridegroom's food. A bad omen, he thought, as he stopped the procession. "You have forgotten—" and the Young Magician's mouth dropped open as he remembered. Indeed, he had, but who was to fetch the things now? He was carrying the magic bundle and could not put it down nor leave the Bridegroom until they reached the Men's House. One of the age-brothers, called Droopy-Eye because the ceremonial scars of his initiation had turned out his right lower lid, volunteered to run back and bring the missing food-board. His skirt flapping about his legs as he ran, he made a comic sight. The men all laughed but the Old Magician was worried. What kind of day could it be starting out so badly?

Droopy-Eye returned with the board, and the march proceeded. He carried the board gingerly before him, blowing at the flies to keep them away from the honey and the water. The old man was bothered by the flies, too, and was relieved when they reached the Men's House.

The age-brothers led the Bridegroom forward. The Old Magician entered the house first, made sure that it was clean and empty, then took the food-board and laid it on the floor. Then the Bridegroom came in, followed by the Young Magician. The Bridegroom sat down before the board. The Young Magician handed the old man the magic bundle and then went back to stand by the doorway. The men all crowded forward. They could hear the Old Magician chanting as he unwrapped the bundle.

"Bridegroom, I place the Sacred Stones around your neck. You will wear them for this day in meditation. And no magic can prevail against you. You will be able to live in the house of your mother-in-law and speak to her with
no fear. You will be the father of many. And you will make the beans grow and the rains come.”

The men pressed forward and, as the sun’s rays filtered through several cracks in the thatched roof, they saw the reflections of the jade and turquoise stones in the cunningly twisted necklace.

The Bridegroom sat still until the old man had finished his chant. Then he arose, took the old man by the right hand, and led him to the door. The old man went out, closed the door, and tied three blades of long grass through the bolt holes, muttering a charm as he did so.

The men laughed and shouted as they ran toward the playing field behind the clearing on which the Men’s House fronted. The age-brothers, led by Droopy-Eye, were tossing a ball back and forth as they went.

The Old Magician sat cross-legged before the door, the young one at his side. He tried to ignore the fire in his belly as he and the young man repeated the magic phrases: “To protect the People—to make them well—to protect the People—to feed them well—to bring the rains, the sun, the birds—to protect the People—” He noted that the young man’s eyes were not fixed, but were wandering, and he held his head as though he could hear the cries from the distant playing field.

The Old Magician was disgusted. There was nothing to do but start over again. Perhaps the magic itself would work on the young man, to show its importance. “Now awaken, and listen to me! Tonight, at the dance, you must recite how the magic will help the People. And you must also tell them that which they know, but which they delight to hear again. You will say: ‘The boys become initiates and age-brothers, and go to live with the men. At the time of marriages, as now, when the Honorary Mother’s husband has been dead two years, a new Honorary Father is chosen, and the first-born daughter of the Honorary Mother takes her place. And because they do what should be done in the manner that is prescribed, the rains come, and the beans grow, and . . . ‘” His voice petered out. The pain was too great. “Go and fetch me my poppy-honey,” he ordered the young man.

When he reached into the jar he was surprised to find so little left. He must have taken more than he realized during the night. After the poppy-honey had taken effect, he felt less angry towards the young man and they played a game of bone dice. Then they ate fruit and drank water. Then it was the time for the afternoon sleep; the noise from the players stopped and all
that could be heard was the rustling of the beetles in the grass. The young man took a long nap; the old man, a short one. All the time they had sat before the door of the Men’s House. They were both impatient and tired of the inactivity and were glad to see that the sun had begun to near the horizon.

Soon they heard the men joking and shouting as they returned. They all gathered before the door of the hut and the Old Magician inspected the tri-fold knot. It was intact. He broke it sharply, and called out, “Bridegroom, come forth!”

There was no answer. The Young Magician called annoyedly, “Bridegroom, come forth! It is finished!”

Again no reply. The men stopped chattering, began to push together and murmur. Something was not right. The Old Magician called again, and when there was again no response, opened the door himself, shuddering at this violation of the ritual.

There was a silence, and then a loud shout from the men, as they saw from the doorway the Bridegroom sprawled, sound asleep on his back with his skirt thrown up over his face. Both magicians, very angry at such indecency in the Men’s House, rushed in and shook him. The Bridegroom muttered and mumbled and then got up, unsteady and drowsy. The Young Magician was the first to see that the Sacred Stones were not around his neck. The old man was furious.

“Unworthy nameless,” he cried out. “Where are the Stones?”

But the Bridegroom only stared at him stupidly, fumbling at his neck. The young man shook him, the old man slapped him, until his head began to clear and he became more alert. Meanwhile the men had again become still. They were fearful. The Sacred Stones were gone—the Bridegroom could not be a Bridegroom—the People would have no Father..... They sat down slowly before the house and awaited the actions of the magicians.

The Old Magician closed the door of the Men’s House and in the gloom bade the faulted Bridegroom to sit down. Then he turned to the Young Magician, “Now, we must save the People. There is magic to be done, and we must use this magic as we should. First, let us examine the Bridegroom to see if he is evil.”

They uncoiled his hair—there were no white streaks in it. They took off his skirt—it was unblemished. They looked at his ceremonial markings—they were as before.

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“Now, the Stones have left,” said the Old Magician, “but not because of defect in the Bridegroom. Let us look further.”

He smoothed out a clear place on the packed-dirt floor and, taking some wood chips, fiber, and flint from his pouch, he had the Young Magician make a small fire. He added a pinch of grayish powder. A dense smoke billowed up for a moment, and then rapidly disappeared, going out through a previously unnoticed opening in the thatched roof near the back of the house.

“Behold,” the old man cried out, “the smoke has shown us the way out of the Sacred Stones! They have gone through the roof opening!”

And while he blew on the fire, the unhappy Bridegroom said, “I do not know what happened, I sat and thought of my bride, and felt my strength grow in me, and I was hungry and I ate, and I was very thirsty and I drank, and I felt at first the magic in me and then I felt very weak and I slept and I dreamed of my bride.”

“Silence!” ordered the Old Magician. “Bring me the bean cake.” A small piece remained. He cast it on the fire. There was a short sputter as it burned with a quick flare-up of bright yellow sodium flame.

“See—the spirit of the salt was in the bean cake! Our magic has shown us how the thirst came. Now bring me the water in the jug.” There was none left, so the magician placed the jug itself in the fire. In a few moments, the bitter smell of poppy filled the room.

“The water held poppy-honey,” the Old Magician told the Bridegroom. “Our magic has shown us why the sleep came on you. Now go and sit by the door while I talk with the Young Magician of secret matters.”

The two magicians sat down together. The old man said, “Now, salt made thirst. Poppy-honey made sleep. One came through the opening in the roof and took the Sacred Stones while the Bridegroom slept. There is no magic in any of this. Our task is easier. But now, he who has the Stones must be made to give them up for we can use no magic that will prevail against him while he has them.”

The Young Magician said, “The Sacred Stones can be of use only to an age-brother. With them he has the right to be the Honorary Father. Let us call in the age-brothers.”

“Agreed,” said the old man, “but we must be careful lest the magic turn against us.”
He opened the door of the house and called for the age-brothers. They came in and stood before the magicians, all silent.

"One of you has done an evil thing," whispered the Old Magician. "And against him we shall use a new magic of great power."

He ordered them to take off their ceremonial skirts; they did so; the necklace was not visible. He gave them a sharp flint and had them pare their nails; he threw the parings on the fire but only the pungent odor of burning horn came, and as that died down, the faint odor of hair oil. He told them to unloose their hair, and as Droopy-Eye started to do so, he cried out, "Stop your magic!" The Sacred Stones fell from out his braids to the floor, and the Young Magician seized them as they fell.

The Old Magician told them all to dress, replaced the Sacred Stones on the Bridegroom's neck, and opened the door of the house.

"Behold!" he called out. "It is as before! Rejoice and let there be a great wedding feast!" The men jumped and cheered, and led the Bridegroom and the age-brothers before them to the village square. The two magicians stood watching them from the doorway of the Men's House.

"My father, my teacher," murmured the young man, "why did you not punish Droopy-Eye? And tell me how the magic worked."

The old man was suddenly weary again, and yet glad that there had been trouble, for now the young man understood the deep uses of magic. He answered, "Let us sit down, and I will tell you. When the magic showed us that it was a man, and no magic, that did the evil thing, and when we knew that our magic could not prevail against him, we said we had a new magic that could prevail. The wicked man could misbelieve the old magic but who can hazard not believing a new magic? When he went back to our hut, Droopy-Eye dipped the Honorary Mother's bean cake in the salt. He took my poppy-honey and put it in the water jug. He stole away from the playing field while the men slept and climbed through the thatching at the back of the Men's House. He hid the Sacred Stones in his braids. He knew no magic could harm him. But when we said we had a new magic, and he saw us doing strange things, he was unsettled, and when we ordered the age-brothers to unbind their hair, he became fearful. The People honor us because we are the keepers of the magic and we know its use. They know that it is not the words of the charm that have meaning but the way they are used. Learn this, my

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son, when trouble comes to the People, use the magic well and think long before you use it.”

“You are right, my father, my teacher,” said the young man, “but you did not punish him. Why? Surely he would have done harm to the People!”

“You are right, my son, my brother,” answered the Old Magician, “but consider, all of the People will know what he has done and he will be shamed before them. Is not that a punishment? And the People will know that their magicians are so powerful and thought so little of that evil thing that he would have done that they did not bother to take note of the offender. That will give strength to the magicians and help them protect the People. And then all will go as before in the land as in the days of our fathers’ fathers.”