

‘Well, even though I was so worried about Lotus Blossom, I have to tell you I couldn’t help being excited about the shoes.’

‘Who could?’ cried Dad. ‘No one would blame you for that!’

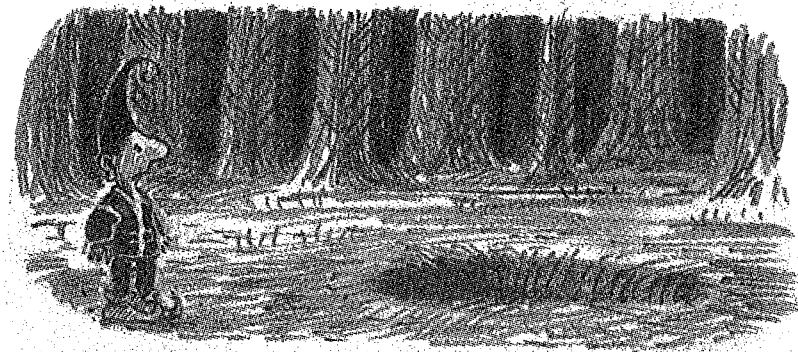
‘So I decided to run home – just for a minute, you know – and show my family. But those shoes had other ideas! They went on running in quite the opposite direction: over the bridge and into the forest. I tried to stop, but the shoes wouldn’t let me. I tried to kick them off, but they were stuck fast to my feet. I was getting very tired, and a little bit scared.’



‘Who wouldn’t be?’ said Dad.

‘Even I, with my vast experience, would be alarmed by the situation,’ put in Uncle Joe.

‘Yes, and then I saw the long shadows of the trees and the deepening dusk. Soon it would be dark, and I didn’t know where on earth the shoes were taking me.’



‘Just then I heard a shout. The shoes bounded on and stopped suddenly near the edge of a deep pit. A tiger pit! I shivered deep inside. I’d had quite enough of tigers, remember, when I was trapped with one in that wicked Baron’s storeroom.’

‘Old Baron *bogey*,’ muttered Dad.

‘A voice yelped again, “Is anyone there?” And do you know, it was Lotus Blossom!’

“Yes, it’s me, Tashi!” I called, and the shoes moved forward. I leaned over the side of the pit. “Hello, Lotus Blossom. How did you come to fall down there? You weren’t *hiding*, were you?”



“No!” yelled Lotus Blossom, stamping her foot. “It’s no joke being down here. I got lost, and I was running, and there were branches over the pit so you couldn’t see it. Oh, Tashi, I’ve been here all day, so frightened that a tiger might come and fall in on top of me.”

‘I jerked back and shot a look over my shoulder. But what could I do? I had no rope or any means of getting her up. Then my toes tingled inside the shoes, reminding me. Yes! My splendid magic shoes could take me home in no time and I would be back with a good long rope as quick as two winks of an eye.

‘But at that moment Lotus Blossom began to scream. My heart thumped as I saw a large black snake slithering down into the hole, gliding towards her.

‘I didn’t have time to think. The shoes picked me up and jumped me down into the pit. *Wah!*



‘Maybe I’ll land on the snake and squash him, I thought. But no, the snake heard me coming and slid to one side. I landed with a crash.

“Hide behind me, Lotus Blossom,” I said, facing the serpent. Lotus Blossom did as I told her, but doesn’t she always have to have the last word? She picked up rocks and threw them at the snake, shouting “WAH! PCHAAA!”



“Leave him, Lotus Blossom!” I whispered, but it was too late. The snake was enraged. It drove us back into the corner, lunging fiercely.

“Put your arms around my waist and hold on,” I told Lotus Blossom.

‘No sooner had she done so than my feet began to tingle. The magic shoes jumped me straight up the steep side of the pit and out into the clean, fresh air.



‘I hoisted Lotus Blossom onto my shoulders and with a few exciting bounds we were back in the village square. The bell was rung to call back the searchers, and you should have seen them racing joyfully towards us! They swept Lotus Blossom up into their arms, clapping and cheering like thunder. Wang Mah grabbed her, and scolded and wept, her long white hair tangling them both together. But when the crowd saw me doing one of my playful little leaps – well, *flying* right over their heads! – they gasped in amazement.

“Look at those shoes! Where did he get them? Look at him fly!” they cried.

‘I was just taking my bow when I spied a face in the crowd that I had hoped never to see again: my greedy Uncle Tiki Pu.’



‘Oh, *him!*’ Jack turned to Uncle Joe. ‘He’s the worst uncle ever. When he came to stay with Tashi, he threw all the toys out the window to make way for his things!’

‘I just brought my pyjamas and a change of underpants for the weekend,’ said Uncle Joe quickly. ‘Is that all right?’



‘When the crowd drifted away,’ Tashi went on, ‘I walked home. I was feeling very gloomy, muttering to myself, when suddenly Tiki Pu’s shadow loomed over me. He was rubbing his hands together with glee, and my heart sank. But I needn’t have worried about him coming to *stay* – that was going to be the least of my problems.’

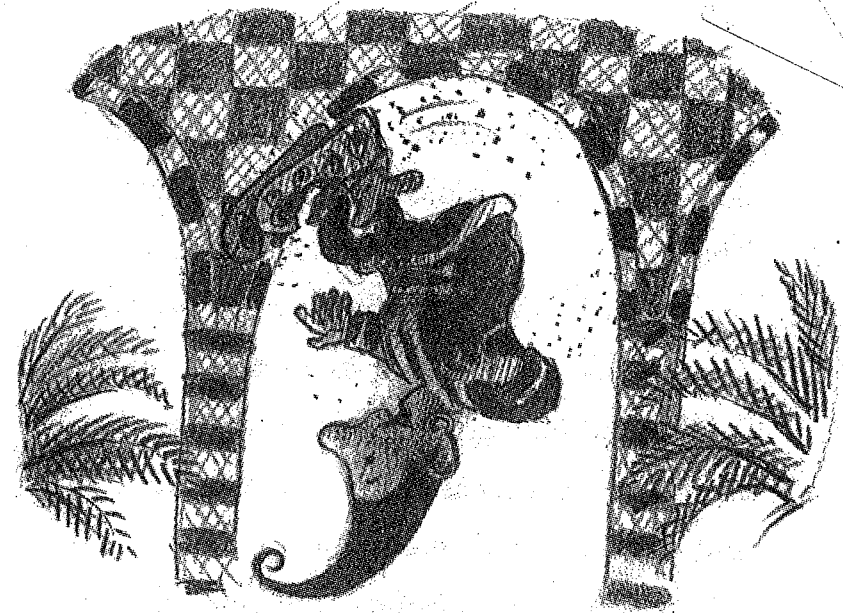
“‘You must come to the city with me, Tashi,” he said, gripping my shoulder hard. “I know the Emperor well. Er, not the Emperor himself, perhaps, but certainly his Master of Revels. He could arrange for you to dance at the Palace. We will make our fortunes!”



'We will! *Our* fortunes? I thought.

'Tiki Pu was very insistent, never letting me have any peace with all his jawing on – “imagine, the *Emperor*, the *Emperor*!” – so in the end I agreed to go.

'The next morning, Tiki Pu stood on my toes (yes, it hurt, but at least it was quick) and off we bounded. It was amazing – a journey that took days of normal walking was over in half an hour. Suddenly, there we were at the front door of the Emperor's Master of Revels.



'The Master didn't look too pleased to see Uncle Tiki Pu. But after he had watched me do six somersaults from one leap, and dance up one wall, across the ceiling and down the other side, he clapped Tiki Pu on the shoulder.

“The Emperor is giving a grand dinner tonight,” he said. “The boy will dance for him at the Palace.”

“Will the Princess Sarashina be there?” I asked.



“No, she is away visiting her aunt,” the Master of Revels called over his shoulder as he hurried away to make the arrangements. Then he stopped. I saw him look back at me, and a sly expression came over his face. His eyes narrowed into a mean smile.

‘We had only gone a little way when the Master came after us. He had two huge evil-looking guards with him.

“Take those shoes from the boy,” the Master ordered. “They should fit my son perfectly. He will be much more graceful. Why should *this* clumsy oaf have the honour of dancing before the Emperor!”



“The Master’s honourable son will bring him glory and gold!” said the first guard.

“Praise and presents!” said the second guard.

“The shoes won’t come off,” I said loudly. “I’ve *tried*.”

‘The guards rushed at me and pushed and pulled, but they couldn’t remove the shoes.

“Oh, well – chop off his feet!” ordered the Master. “We can dig his toes out of the shoes later.”

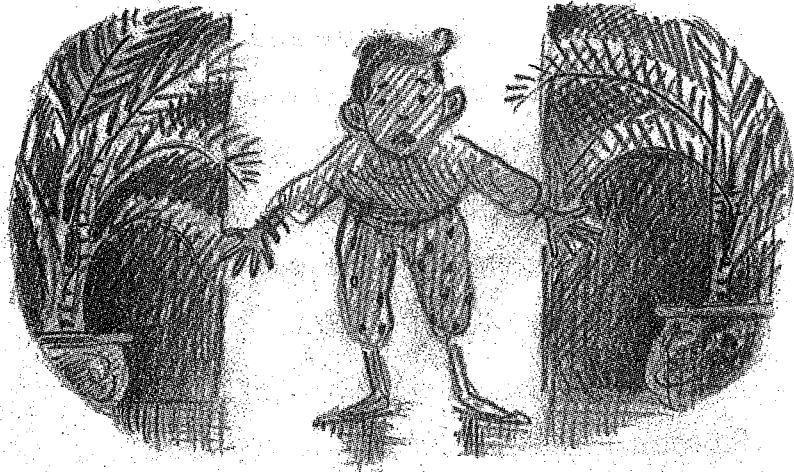
‘I looked desperately at my uncle. Tiki Pu took a very small step forward. “Ah,” he stammered. “You shouldn’t really, I mean to say, that’s not very – ”

“Be quiet,” snapped the Master, “or we will chop off his head, and yours as well.”

‘Tiki Pu stepped back quickly. “Oh, in that case . . . ”

'Some uncle, I thought bitterly.

'The guard drew out his mighty sword and swung it up above his head . . . But before he could bring it down, the door flew open and Princess Sarashina burst into the room.



“What are you doing?” she cried. “Put that sword down at once. This is Tashi, the boy who rescued me from the demons and saved my life! Just as well I came back early, Tashi. What a way to repay your kindness.” She scolded the Master of Revels and his guards out of the room.

'Well, I was never so glad to see anyone in my whole life. So when the Princess invited me to take tea with her, I followed her into a beautiful room all hung about with silks and tapestries, and we talked and laughed until nightfall.

'That evening I danced for the Emperor and the Court. I twirled high over people's heads and swooped and ducked and glided like a bird.



“Miraculous!” they cried, throwing coins at me, which Uncle Tiki Pu hastily gathered up. The Emperor gave me a nice little bag of gold for my trouble, but Tiki Pu was at my side at once. He whisked the bag from my hand.

“I’ll keep this safe for you, Tashi my boy,” he beamed, as he slipped it into his pocket.



“Is there anything else I can do for you, Tashi?” the Emperor asked.

“Not for me, your Highness, but there is something my uncle would dearly like.”

“Tiki Pu pricked up his ears and gave me a toothy grin.

“And what is that, my boy?” the Emperor smiled.

“My uncle has always had a great desire to travel.” Out of the corner of my eye I saw that Tiki Pu looked very surprised. I whispered something in the Emperor’s ear.’

‘What? What?’ cried Dad.



‘I know, I know!’ cried Uncle Joe.

‘Well, the next day I returned home alone and went straight at once to see Luk Ahed, the fortune teller. “You were right about the shoes,” I said, “but I’ve had enough adventures for the time being, and I’m so tired. Can you tell me how to take them off?”

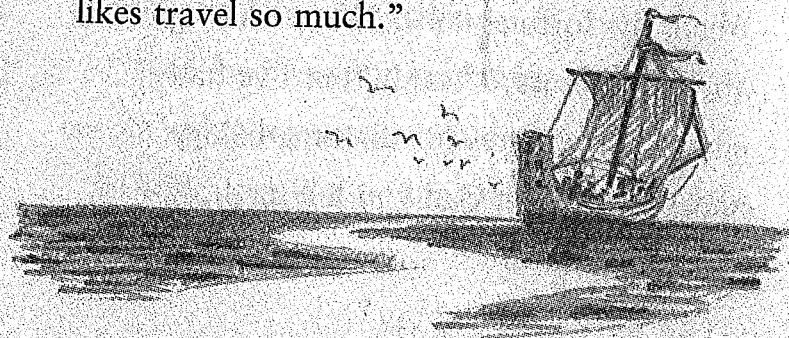


“Nothing could be easier,” said Luk Ahed. “All you have to do is twirl around three times, clap your hands and say, Off shoes!”

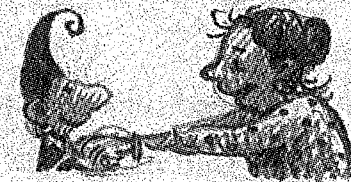
I followed his instruction and oh, the relief to wiggle my toes in the cool dust. I carried the shoes home and carefully put them in the bottom of my playbox.

“And Tiki Pu hasn’t come back with you?” my mother asked when I told her about the grand dinner and the Emperor and Princess Sarashina.

“No, he couldn’t. A ship was leaving the next morning for Africa and the Emperor thought that it was too good an opportunity for Tiki Pu to miss, seeing he likes travel so much.”



‘My mother gave me one of her searching looks. “What a clever Tashi,” she said at last, and smiled.’



There was a little silence at the table. Then Dad snorted loudly. ‘Some uncle, all right, that Tiki Pu. Of all the lily-livered, cowardly . . . You wouldn’t say *he* was a precious relative, would you, Tashi?’

‘About as precious as a crocodile hanging off your leg!’ put in Uncle Joe.

‘He may have met a few by now,’ grinned Tashi. ‘Crocodiles are quite common in Africa, aren’t they?’

‘So I believe,’ said Joe. ‘In fact once, when I was in a typical African forest,



I saw a crocodile grab the muzzle of a zebra. Pulled him into the river, easy as blinking. Dreadful sight. A Nile crocodile, it was. Notorious man-killers. Did I tell you about the time . . . ?'

And so Tashi stayed till dusk crept in all over the table and Dad had to put the lights on and Tashi's mother called him home for dinner.

'Come back tomorrow, young fellow!' urged Uncle Joe. 'I'm cooking *crocodile!*'

