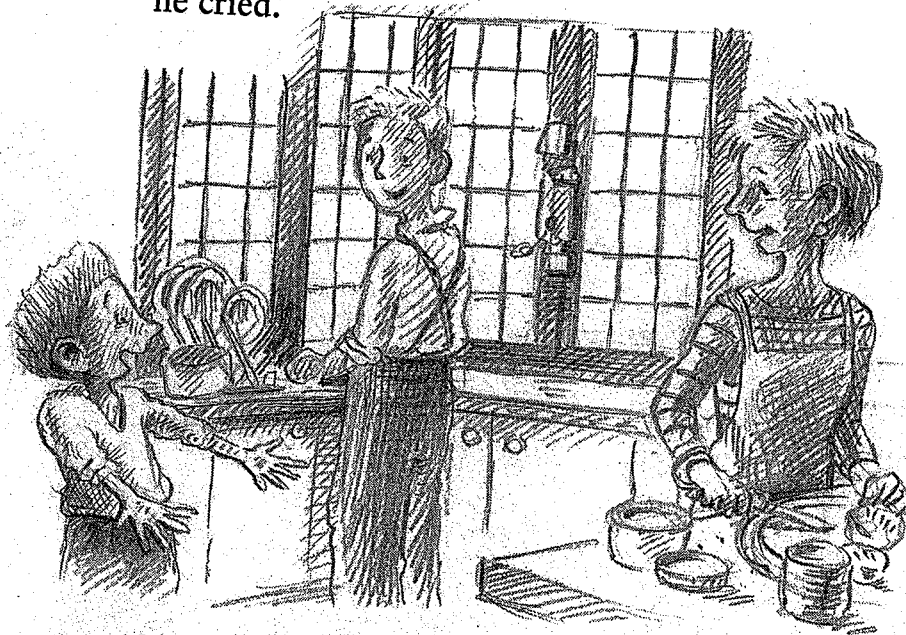


TASHI AND THE STOLEN CHILDREN

Jack burst into the kitchen. 'Tashi's back!' he cried.



'Oh, good,' said Dad. 'Has he been away?'
'Yes, I *told* you,' said Jack, 'don't you remember? He went back to the old country to see his grandmother for the New Year holiday. And while he was there, something terrible happened.'

'His grandmother ran away with the circus?' suggested Dad.

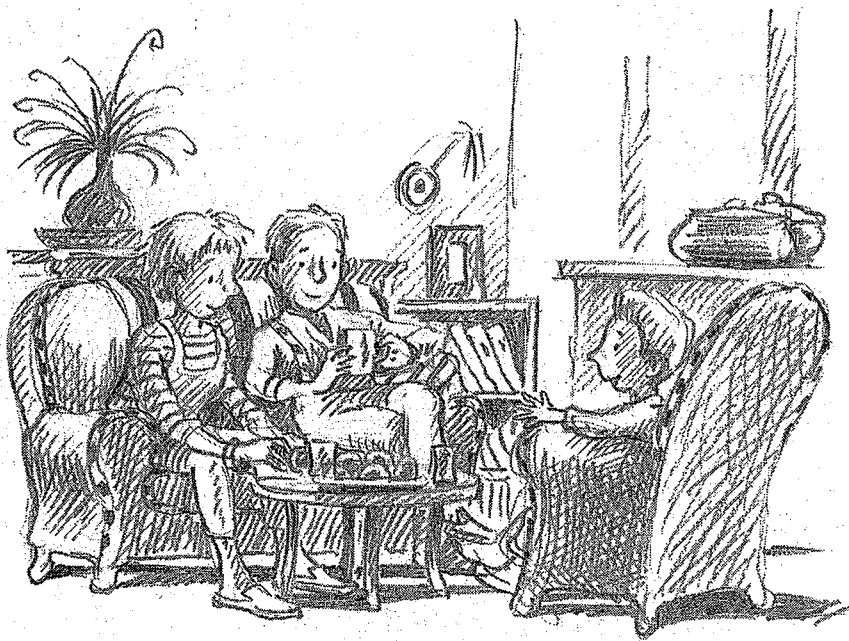
'No,' said Jack. 'She can't juggle. But listen, you know the war lord who came looking for Tashi last year?'

'Yes, I do remember him,' said Dad. 'He was the only war lord in Wilson Street last summer, so I won't forget him in a hurry.'

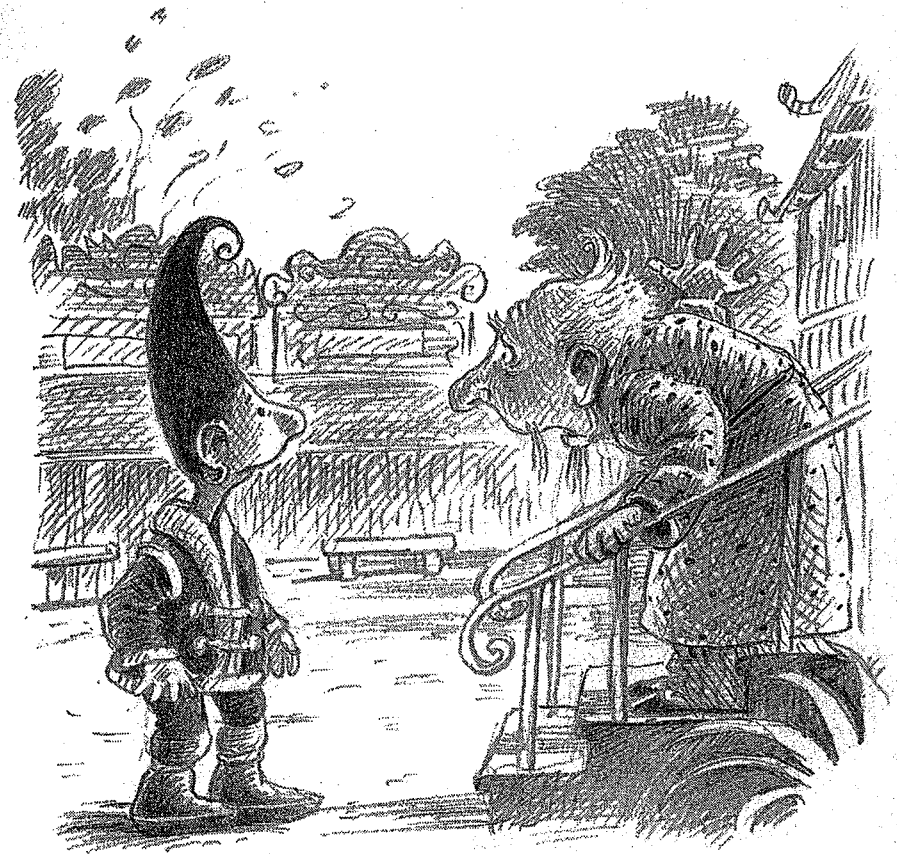
'Yes, and guess what,' Jack began, but Mum interrupted him.



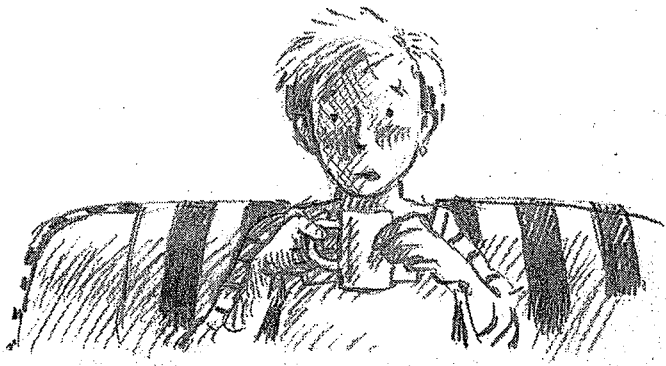
'Come and have some afternoon tea, while you tell us,' she said, and brought a tray into the living room.



'Well,' said Jack, when they were settled comfortably. 'It was like this. When Tashi arrived back in his village, it was all quiet. *Strangely* quiet. None of his old friends



were playing in the square, and he could hear someone crying. His grandfather told him that the war lord had just made a raid through the village. He'd captured nearly all the young men for his army—and he had kidnapped six children as well!



'What did he take the *children* for?'
asked Mum.

'So that the men would fight bravely and
not run away home,' Jack told her. 'If they
didn't fight, he was going to punish
the children.'

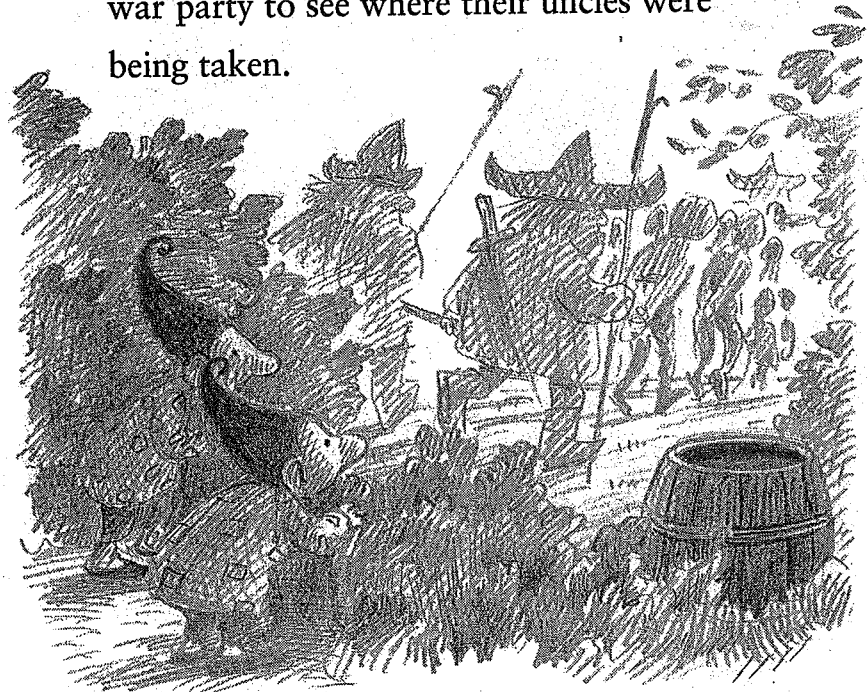
'He deserves to be fried in a fritter, that war
lord!' exploded Dad.



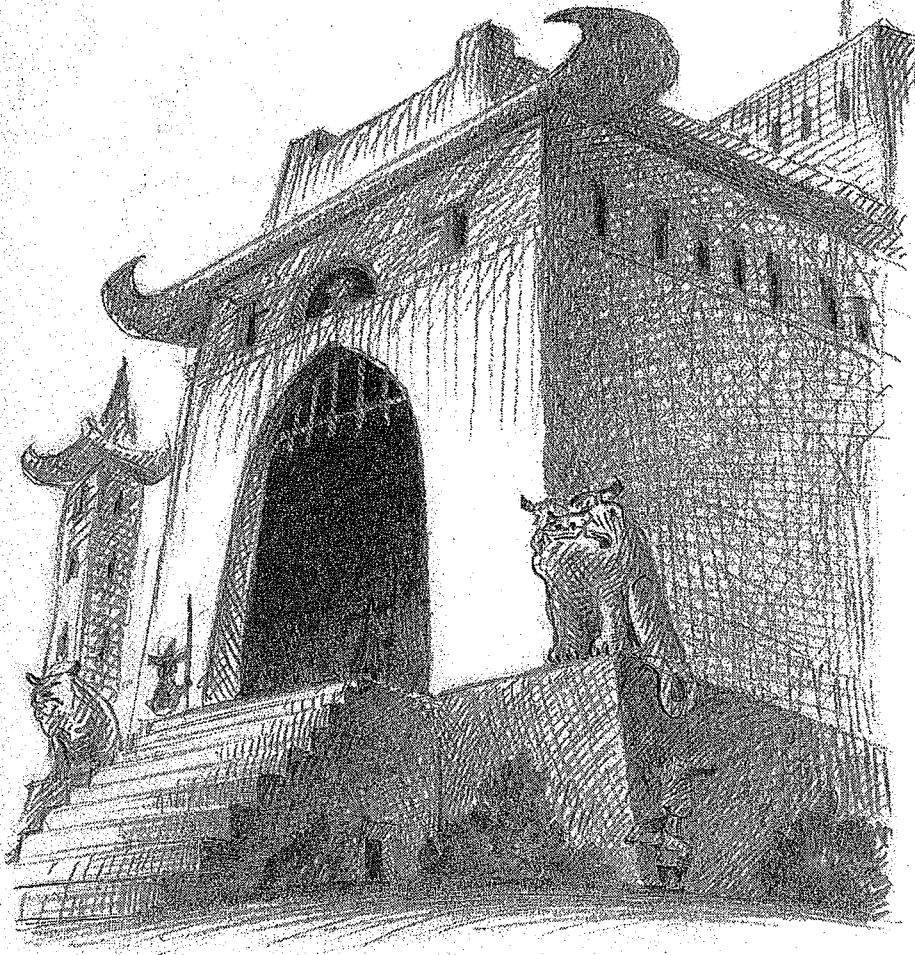
'Yes,' agreed Jack. 'Well, just then the Wan
twins came running back into the village
square.



'They had hidden while the soldiers seized
the young men. Then they'd followed the
war party to see where their uncles were
being taken.'



'The twins said that the children had been put in the dungeon of the war lord's palace. The twins searched and climbed and tapped and dug, but they could find no way in. They said the children were lost forever.'

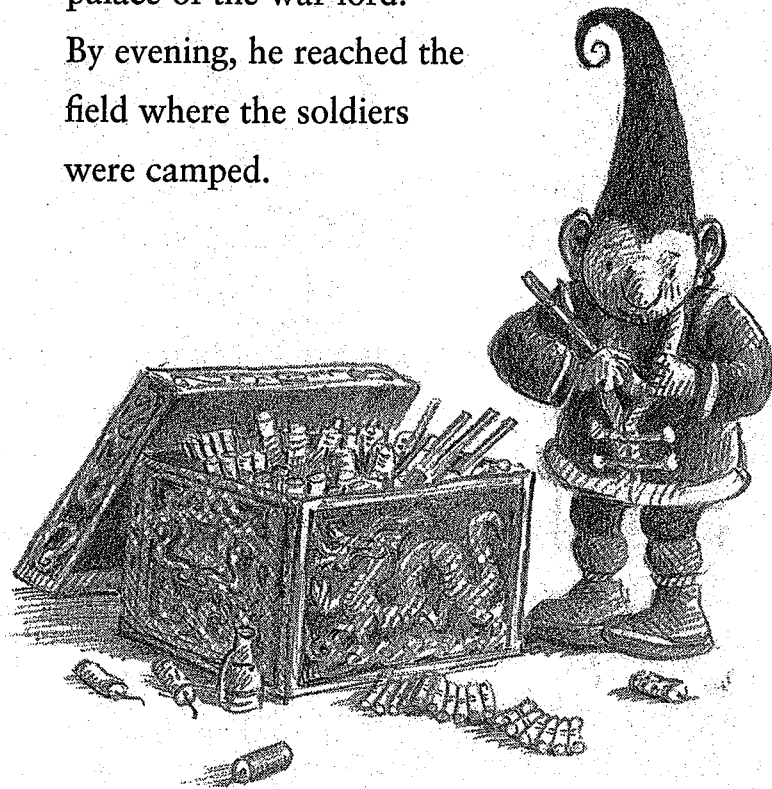


'Everybody in the square listened to the Wan twins' story, and a dreadful moaning began. The sound of sadness rose and swelled like a wave. Parents and aunties and cousins hung onto each other as if they were drowning. Then, one by one, people turned to Tashi. He had once worked for the war lord in that very palace.'

'Uh oh,' Dad shook his head. 'I bet he was wishing that he had gone on holidays another time.'

'Not Tashi,' said Jack. 'He slipped away to think, and when he returned he went to his grandfather's box of firecrackers and filled his pockets. Then he set off for the palace of the war lord.'

By evening, he reached the field where the soldiers were camped.



'He crept past the guards and found the uncles. They were miserable, sitting silent and cold, far from the cooking fires. Tashi whispered to them that they must get ready to leave at any moment, as he was on his way to the dungeon. One man clung to him, crying, "My little sister is only five years old, Tashi. She will be so frightened. You must find the children." Tashi promised to be back by morning.'



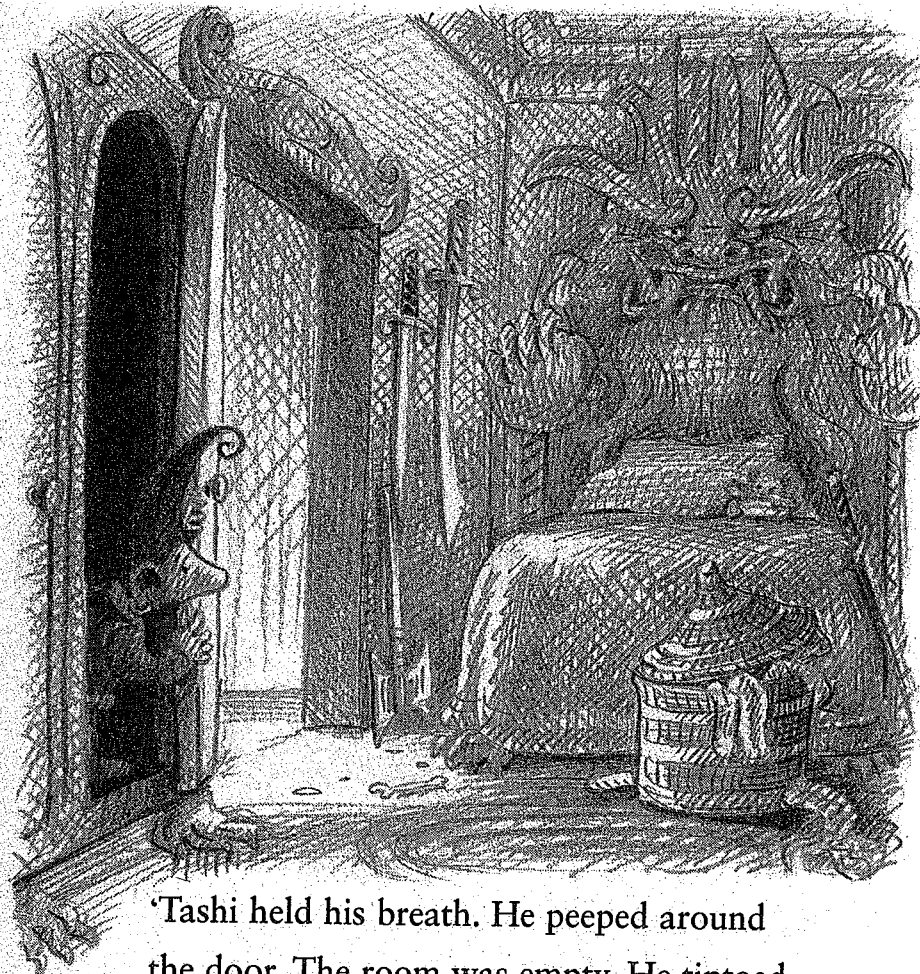
'Then he went on alone. He remembered a secret passage into the palace that he'd discovered when he was living there before. You entered in a cave nearby and came out through a wardrobe in the war lord's very own bedroom.'



'Ugh,' shuddered Mum. 'I'd rather be anywhere in the world than *there*.'
'I know,' shivered Dad. 'A man like that, you can imagine how his socks smell.'

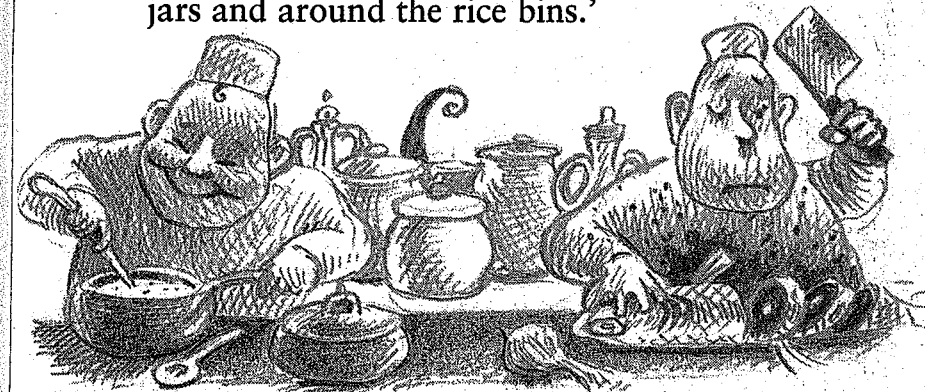


'Well, anyway,' Jack went on, 'Tashi found the cave and pulled aside the bushes covering the entrance. He ran through the damp tunnel and held his breath as he pushed at the wardrobe door. It creaked. What if the war lord had just come upstairs to get a sharper sword?'
'Or change his socks?' put in Dad.



'Tashi held his breath. He peeped around the door. The room was empty. He tiptoed out into the hall and down the stairs. At the last step he stopped. He felt the firecrackers in his pockets, and quivered. A daring plan had popped into his head. But, he wondered, was he brave enough to do it?

'Instead of going further down the stairs into the dungeon, he found his way along to the kitchens. The cooks were busy preparing a grand dinner for the war lord and didn't notice Tashi as he crawled behind the oil jars and around the rice bins.'



'What was he doing?' asked Mum.

'Having a little snack, of course,' said Dad, taking a bite of Jack's scone.

