



THE FORTUNE TELLER

‘Funny how crocodile tastes almost exactly like chicken,’ remarked Dad.

‘Yes, same chewy white meat,’ said Mum.

Uncle Joe stared very hard at his plate. ‘Actually,’ he said, after a long pause, ‘they were out of crocodile at the supermarket. Fancy! In Tiabulo, where I’ve just come from, you can buy it everywhere: canned, baked, boiled . . . Great for late night suppers when the fish aren’t jumping.’



'Thank the stars we don't live in Tiabulo,' Dad whispered to Jack, behind his hand.

It was Sunday, and the family were sitting down to lunch. It was a late lunch because Uncle Joe had taken ages to cook it, but Tashi had only just arrived. He'd been making the dessert.

'Have you ever tried ghost pie?' asked Tashi. 'It's a secret recipe learned from ghosts I once knew.'

'No,' said Uncle Joe, 'but I remember a fortune teller once said -'

'Luk Ahed?' asked Jack.

'No, another one, in the Carribean Islands. Anyway, this man told me that when I was forty-three I would visit my brother and meet a wise young lad who would offer me a most mysterious dessert.'

'Aha!' Dad smacked his forehead. 'Ghost pie! Eat a slice and walk through walls. What's more mysterious than that? Your fortune came true then, didn't it?'

'Sometimes it does,' Tashi said slowly, 'and sometimes it doesn't.'

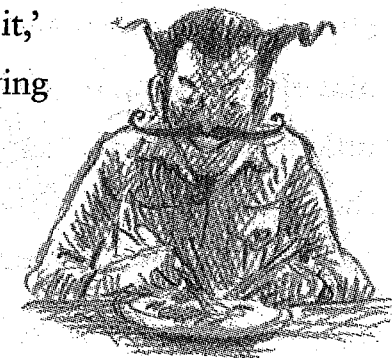
Jack looked hard at Tashi. 'Did you go back and see *your* fortune teller?'

Tashi nodded. 'Yes, and it wasn't long before I wished I'd never stepped foot in the place.' He put his fork down. 'Luk Ahed had been so clever telling me about the magic shoes, I decided to visit him again. I thought maybe he'd find some more surprises in my horoscope.'

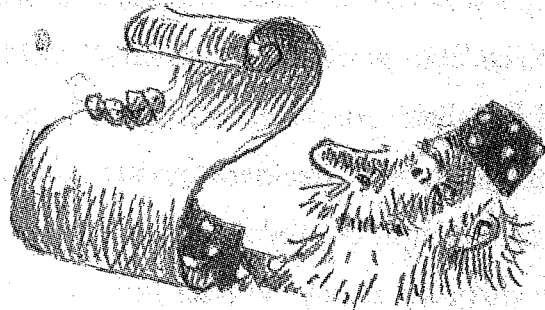
'And *did* he?' asked Dad eagerly.

'You can *bet* on it,' said Uncle Joe, playing hard with his peas.

'They always do.'



'More than I'd ever bargained for,' agreed Tashi. 'See, it was like this. Luk Ahed was just finishing his breakfast when I arrived, but he put down his pancake and licked his fingers. He was like that – always happy to see you, always eager to help. It was only a few days since my last visit to him, so my chart hadn't been completely buried under his books and papers.'



"Here it is!" he cried, pulling it out. He was so surprised and pleased with himself at finding it quickly that he did a little jig and almost upset his breakfast over the table. "Come and sit beside me on the bench while I read, Tashi," he invited.

"Anyone who has already had such an exciting life as yours would be sure to have a very interesting future ahead of him."

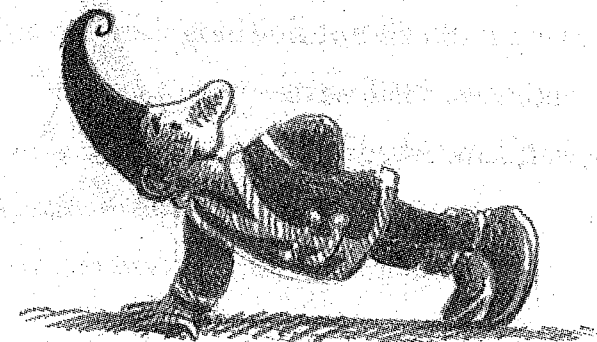
'Well, I watched him read for a minute, and then suddenly he stopped smiling and covered his eyes with his hands.'

"Oh, Tashi," he said in a sorrowful voice.

"What? What is it?"

"Oh, Tashi, on the morning of your 10th birthday you are going to die!"

"But that will be the day after tomorrow! Are you sure, Luk Ahed? I'm so healthy – look!" I jumped up and down and did one-arm push ups to show him I wasn't even breathing hard.



Luk Ahed shook his head sadly. "I'm sorry, Tashi, but we can't argue with destiny."

"There must be something we can do. Couldn't *you* put in a good word for me?"

Luk Ahed laughed unhappily. "I'm not important enough for that, Tashi. No, once your name has been written in the Great Book of Fate, there is nothing . . ."

He paused. "Except your name hasn't been entered in the Book yet, has it? And it won't be written in until New Year's Eve . . . in two days' time. And if on that evening you were to . . ."

I was beginning to notice that Luk Ahed had a very annoying habit of not finishing his sentences. "If I were to *what*, Luk Ahed?"



The fortune teller was feverishly looking through his sacred books. "The Gods like to enjoy a particular meal on New Year's Eve," he said. "Very simple, but special. Each God has his own favourite dishes. Now, if we were to serve our God of Long Life his own personal special meal, cooked to perfection . . ."

"He might put me back in the Book of Life!" I finished his sentence.



"Exactly."

'So what are the special dishes?' asked Uncle Joe. 'Not crocodile, by any chance? Braised perhaps, with noodles?'

'No,' Tashi shook his head. 'Wild mushroom omelette with nightingale eggs. Speckled trout with wine and ginger. And a bowl of golden raspberries.'

'Gosh!' said Dad. 'Where would you get a nightingale egg? Are there any in your part of the world, Tashi?'



'Not that I knew of – I'd never seen any nests in our forests. For a moment I did feel low, I can tell you. It all seemed impossible. But then I thought of my friend, the raven. He *had* said, "Just whistle if you ever need my help." Remember when he was hurt after that terrible storm, Jack? The night Baba Yaga blew in? And I knew the children I had rescued from the war lord would gladly gather the mushrooms for me. And Lotus Blossom's mother had a pond at the bottom of her house where I was almost *sure* I'd seen speckled trout swimming. Maybe it wasn't impossible after all.

'So I hastily said goodbye to Luk Ahed and ran home to the mulberry tree where the raven sometimes perched. He flew down at my second whistle and when I told him about the dinner and the nightingale eggs, he said, "Give me your straw basket and I will be back with them tomorrow."



'The village children were very excited when I explained about the mushroom.

"We'll find enough for twenty Gods, Tashi," they shouted. Off they ran with their bags, clattering over the bridge into the fields and forest.



'Meanwhile, I hurried to Lotus Blossom's house. Her mother wasn't so happy to lose the beautiful speckled trout – they were her last three – but she gave a good-hearted smile as she scooped them out of her pond and handed them to me in a bowl of water.

'I raced back to the square where Luk Ahed stood, waving his hands. There was a great argument going on in the village about who would be the best people to cook the dishes. No one was listening to Luk Ahed, who was calling for order. Finally everyone agreed that Sixth Aunt Chow made the most delicious omelettes, but that Big Wu and his Younger Brother, Little Wu, should cook the fish.



'Next morning, cooking fires were set up in the square so everyone could watch and advise. The children were back before noon with beautiful baskets overflowing with four different kinds of mushrooms. In the early afternoon the raven returned. He looked quite bedraggled and tired, but in the basket were a dozen perfect nightingale eggs.

'Mrs Li brought out a bottle of her prized wine to add to the fish and I left them all busily chopping ginger roots and celery and bamboo shoots.

'Now the hardest task lay ahead. In all our province I had only ever seen one bush of golden raspberries. And it belonged to my enemy, the wicked Baron.'

'Oh, no!' cried Jack.

'Oh, yes!' said Tashi. 'I had brought my magic shoes with me but I decided not to put them on. As I walked slowly to his house I went over in my mind exactly *how* I would go about asking the Baron for a bowl of his berries.

'But I didn't have to ask. He had already heard the news and he was waiting for me with a fat smile on his face.

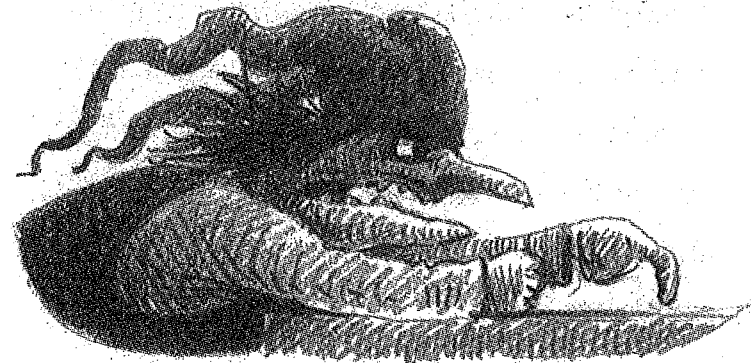


"Well, Tashi," he gloated, "I hear that you are in need of some of my berries."

"Yes, please."

"Oh, you'll have to do much better than that." He shook a playful finger at me. "Something like this. Now, Tashi, say after me: Please, please most kindly, honourable and worthy Baron, could you give some berries to this miserable little worm Tashi, who stands before you?"

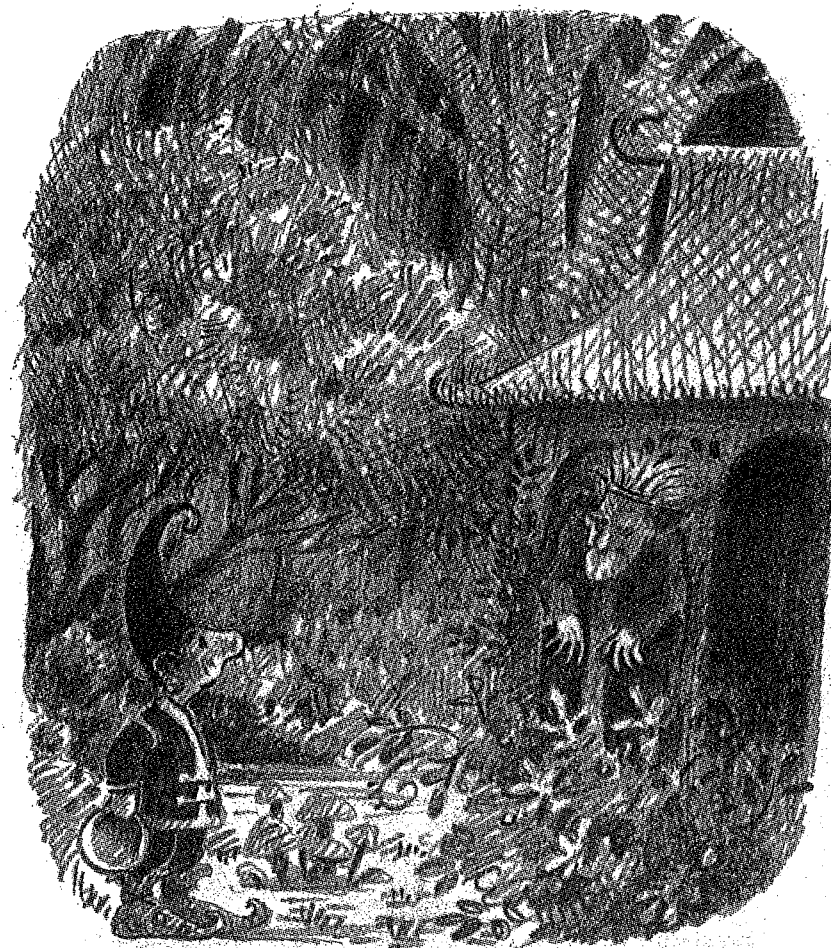
I gritted my teeth and managed to force out the words, but the Baron pretended he couldn't hear and made me say it all over again. When I had finished, he thumped his fist on the table and shouted, "No, I couldn't! After all the trouble you have caused me, I'll be glad to be rid of you. Not a berry will you have."



'I was just leaving his house when Third Aunt called after me. She worked in the Baron's kitchen, remember, Jack? Well, she came close and whispered, "There *is* another bush of golden raspberries, Tashi. It belongs to the Old Witch who lives in the forest. But don't take any without asking her. The berries scream if anyone except the witch picks them."

'Oh dear, I didn't like the sound of that but what was I to do? It was the Old Witch's berries or none.

'This time I slipped my magic shoes on and I was in the forest in a few bounds. I found the Witch's cottage and there in the garden at the back of the house was a small raspberry bush. There were only a few golden berries on it but they looked round and juicy. I touched one gently and it gave a little scream.



'A door opened at once and a bony old figure in a dusty black cloak came hobbling down the path.

"Who is meddling with my raspberry bush?" she shrieked.