

'She looked like a bunch of old broom sticks strung together. She was even more hideous than people had said. Her blackened teeth were bared in a fierce growl and her bristly chin was thrust out so far in rage that her beak almost touched it. I turned to run. I expected my magic shoes would take me to safety in one bound, but something in the way she stood there, alone on the garden path, made me stop. Her mouth puckered around her gums and her eyes were sad. Come to think of it, I had never heard of her harming anyone.



'I took a deep breath and said, "I was just looking at them, Granny, because I have a great need of golden raspberries at the moment."



'She cackled. "Oh, you have, have you?" And she sat herself down on a bench. "Tell me about it then."

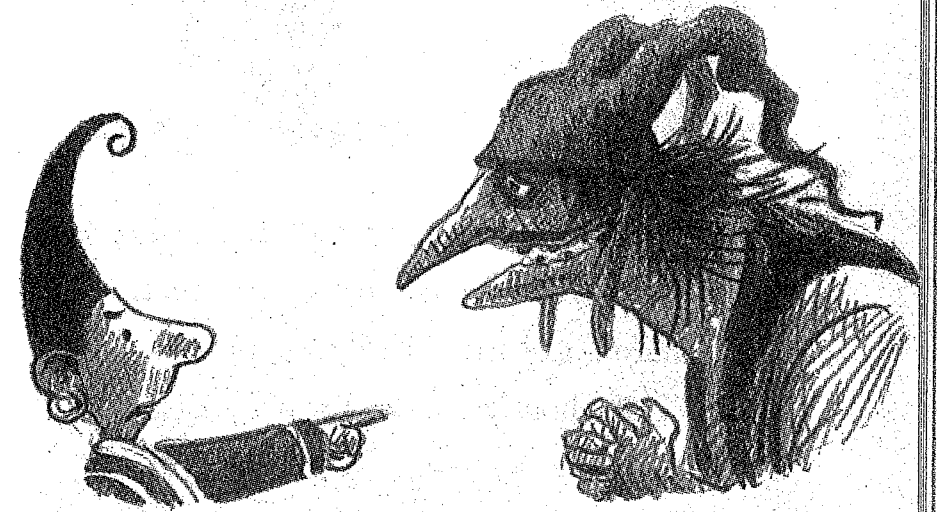
'When I had finished, she pulled herself up on my arm. She grinned at me, and with her mouth no longer set in a growl and her eyes sparkling with interest, she didn't look nearly so scary. "Come on then," she said, "we'll make a nice pot of tea and then you can pick your berries. There aren't many left but you'll find enough to fill a bowl, I'm sure."

'You can imagine how joyfully I ran back with my basket of fruit. But when I reached the bridge by the Baron's house, he was standing there, blocking my way. His eyes bulged when he saw my berries and with a roar of rage he charged towards me and knocked the basket up in the air and into the river. I hung over the railing and watched in despair as the berries bobbed away downstream.



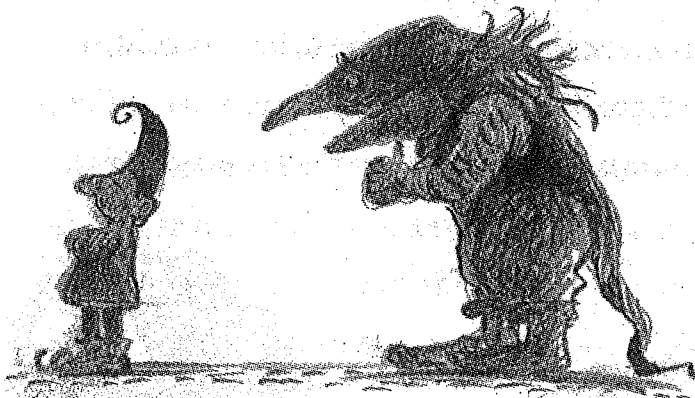
"How are you going to prepare your wonderful meal now, eh, clever Tashi?" the Baron sneered.

'I struggled to hold in my bitter feelings and faced him calmly. "We'll prepare the rest of the meal and I will take it to the mountain top, to the *Gods*, together with a note explaining that the delicious golden raspberries are missing because the wicked Baron, *YOU*, knocked them into the river."



'The Baron's jaw dropped and his mouth opened and closed. "That won't be necessary, my boy. Couldn't you see that I was just having a joke with you?"

'I folded my arms and said nothing while the Baron pleaded with me to take all the golden raspberries I needed.



'Finally, I shook my finger at him. "Oh, you will have to do much better than that. Now, Baron, say after me: Please, please most kindly, honourable and worthy Tashi, could you take the berries of this miserable worm of a Baron, who stands before you?"

'The Baron gritted his teeth and forced out the words. He even tried to smile as I picked his fruit. I thanked him politely for holding the basket for me.

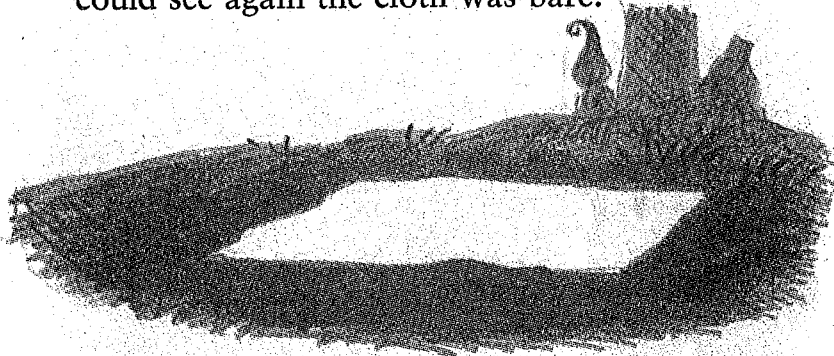
'It was late afternoon by the time I got back to the village and everything was ready. A wonderful omelette filled with delicate flavoursome mushrooms lay on some vine leaves upon my mother's best platter. My mouth watered as I lifted the lid from the dish of speckled trout in wine and ginger and pickled vegetables that only Big Wu and Little Wu knew how to prepare. We washed the raspberries in fresh spring water, dried them and placed them gently in a moss-lined basket.





'Luk Ahed and I carried two baskets each and when we reached the mountain top, we spread out a gleaming white linen tablecloth and set out the meal. It was perfect.

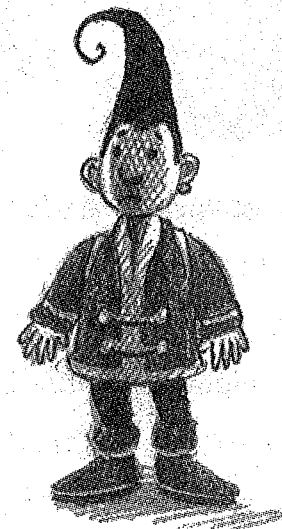
'When it was nearly midnight we hid behind a tree and waited. On the stroke of twelve we were dazzled by a blinding silver light. We blinked against the light, closing our eyes for just a moment, but when we could see again the cloth was bare.



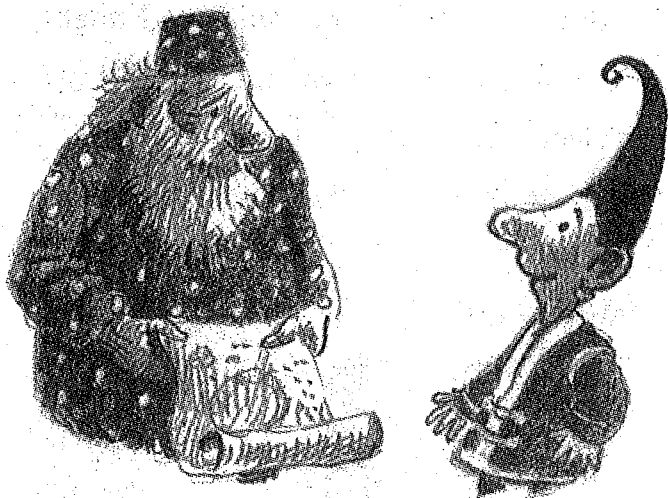
'Luk Ahed and I ran all the way back down the mountain and hurried to his house to see if my horoscope had changed. Luk Ahed peered at the chart, his brow wrinkling deeper with every second. I was holding my breath, and began to feel faint. If he didn't answer soon, I thought I might fall over and die right where I stood.

"Tashi, the bad news is that all our work preparing that magnificent meal was for nothing."

"!!!????!!!"



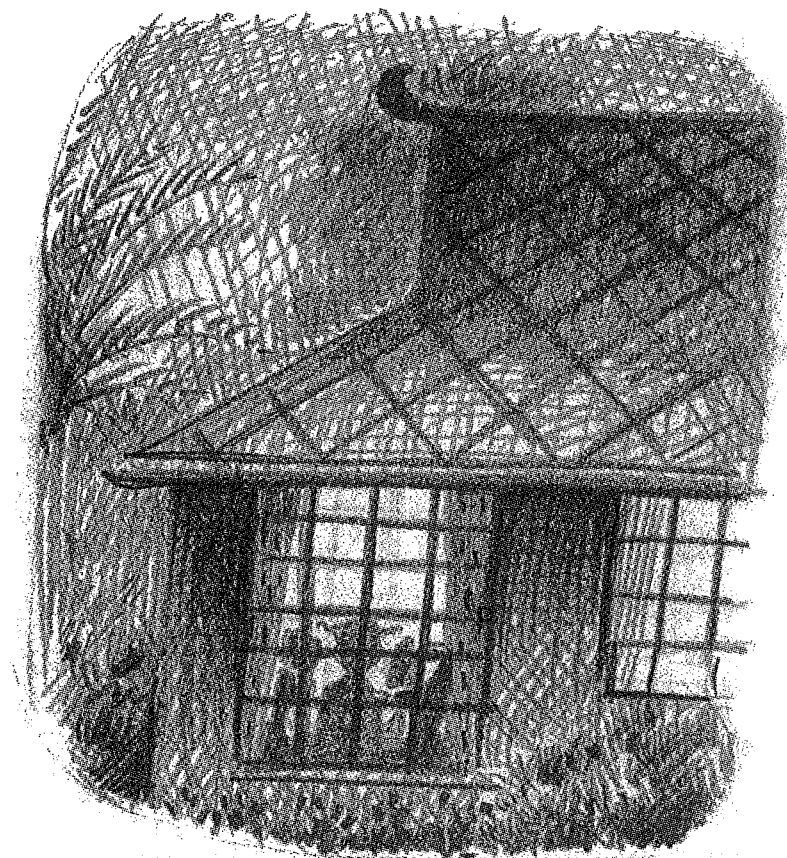
‘Then he smiled guiltily, bowing his head. “The *good* news is that you didn’t need to do any of it. Look, here where I read *10th* birthday, it was really your *100th* birthday. You see, a little bit of breakfast pancake was covering the last zero.”



‘We stared at each other for a moment and began to laugh.

“Let’s not tell the village,” said Luk Ahed. “They might be a little bit cross with me.”

The family looked at Tashi with their



mouths open. Uncle Joe’s was still full of ghost pie, and a dollop fell out onto the table.

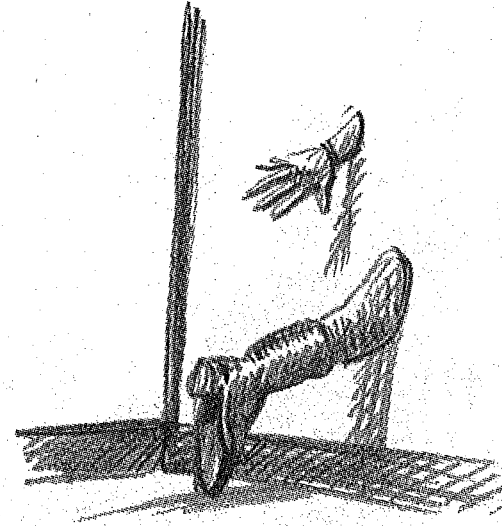
Jack cleared his throat. ‘So how do you think you’ll feel when you are nearly one hundred and you know you’re going to die?’

'Oh,' Tashi waved airily, 'if I'm not quite ready, I'll just prepare another perfect meal for the God of Long Life.'



'Here's to a l-o-n-g friendship then,' said Uncle Joe, raising his glass of wine. They all clinked glasses and wished each other well. Then Uncle Joe added, 'You know, Tashi, that ghost pie really was excellent. It's given me a lot of energy. I think I'll go and stretch my legs after that long meal.' And he rubbed his hands together with excitement.

'It only lasts for three days!' Tashi called out, but Uncle Joe had already walked through the kitchen wall, and was gone.



'Great way to travel,' he yelled from the garden. 'See you soon!' And they heard him humming the old song, '*No walls can keep me in, no woman can tie me down, no jail can hold me now, da dum da dum da dum . . .*'



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