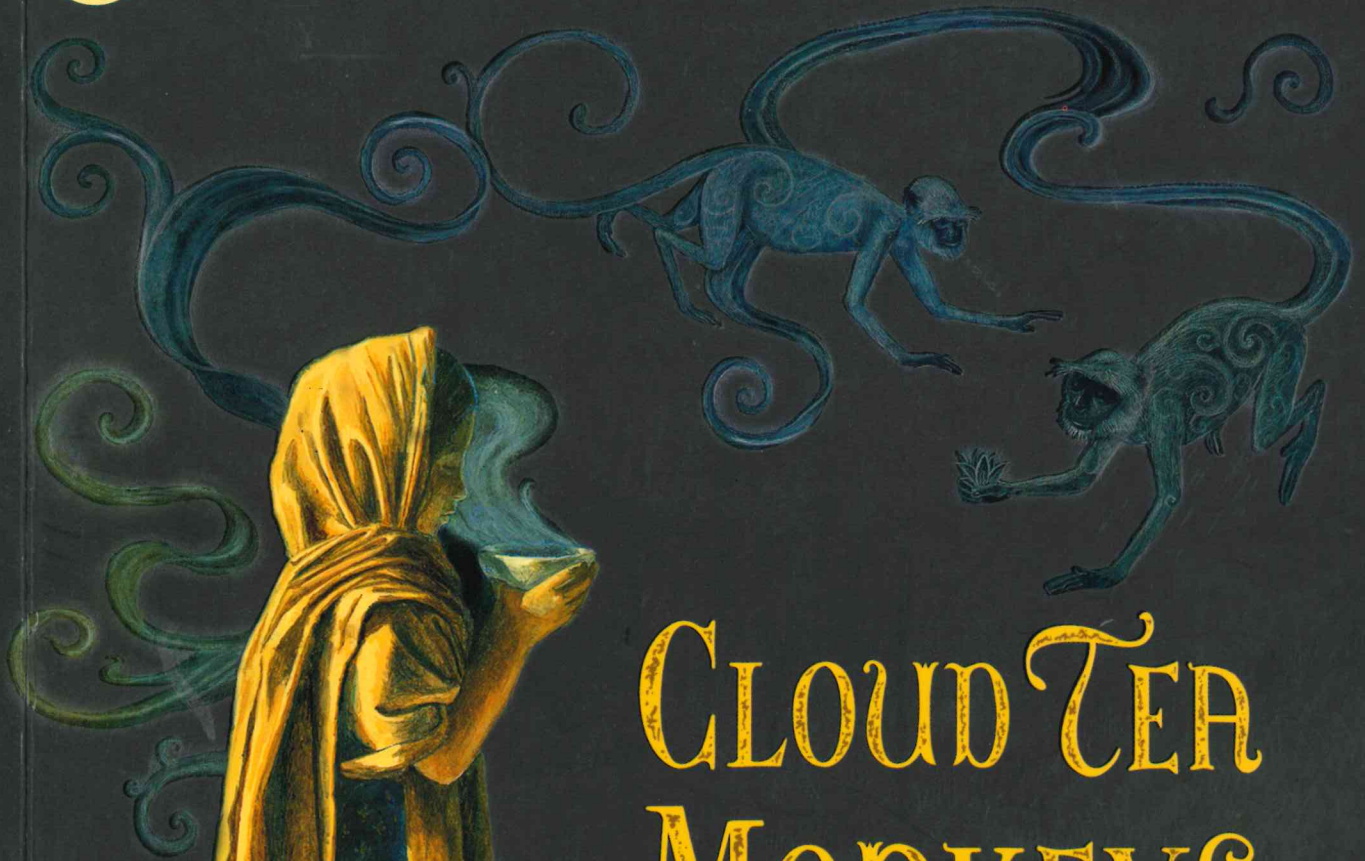




MAL PEET & ELSPETH GRAHAM



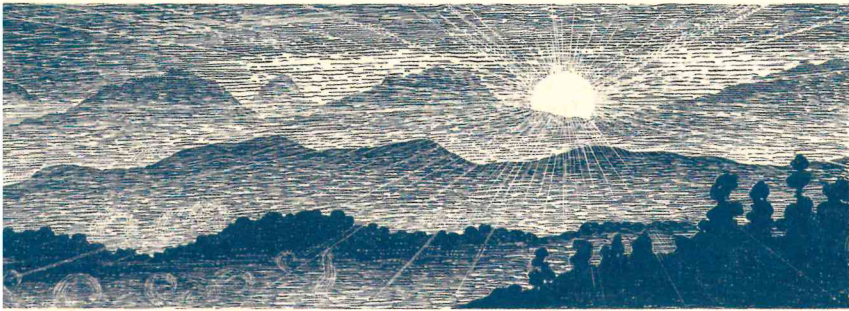
CLOUD TEA MONKEYS

ILLUSTRATED BY
JUAN WIJNGAARD

ONE BY ONE, the familiar sounds of morning drew Tashi from her sleep. Her mother breathing life into the fire; the hiss and crackle of the twigs as the flames caught; the whispering of the soot-blackened kettle as the water came to the boil.

Tashi took her bowl of sweet tea outside and stood beside the rough road in the blue morning. The sun had not yet found a way through the mountains, but it was coming; a light the colour of lemons was soaking into the sky and painting out the stars. The air was very cold. Tashi shivered and pulled her shawl more tightly around herself. As the stars went out, small squares of light appeared on the dark hillside above her: lamps were being lit in the village. A cockerel crowed and another answered. Inside the house her mother coughed, twice.





It was not long before they heard voices and laughter from where the road curved down from the hill. Then the women came, their white headscarves glowing in the half-dark, their clothes bright patches of scarlet, green, and indigo. Each woman carried a great wicker basket, bigger than Tashi. They called her name, their voices wobbly in the cold air. Her mother came out of the house, her back bent under the burden of her tea-basket.

The walk to the tea plantation was long, but for Tashi it was a happy part of the day. The women gossiped and told jokes about their husbands. The sun was kind too, sending warm patches in the road that were good to walk out of the cold shadows. Later the sun would turn a pale, burning down from a hazy sky.



When Tashi and her mother and the women arrived at the plantation the Overseer came out of his hut, yawning and itching his belly. He was a bad-tempered man with a beaky nose and eyes like sharp little stones.



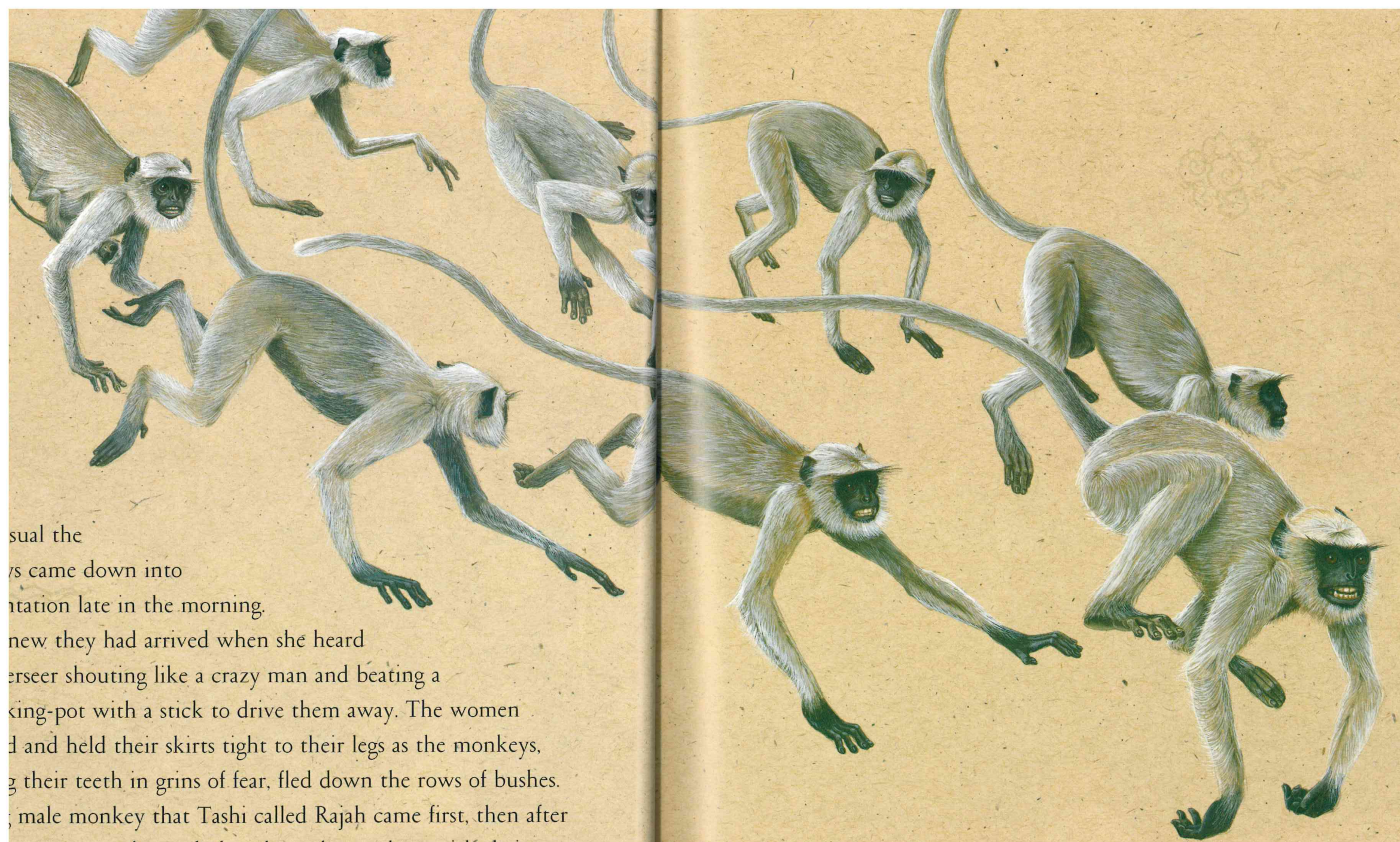
The women stood silently while he told them what they already knew, what they had always known: to pick only the young leaves and the buds from the tops of each bush. Then they found their places and began, plucking the tender leaves and buds and tossing them over their shoulders into their great wicker baskets.

The rows of glossy green tea bushes curved into the distance like waves. Tashi had never seen the end of the plantation. Perhaps it had no end. Perhaps it went right around the world.

Within an hour the sun had sucked the mist up out of the valleys and hung it like a great grey curtain over the tops of the mountains. Up there, on those wild mountain-tops above the cloud, were things Tashi was afraid of: big cats with jade-green eyes and snakes like yellow whips.



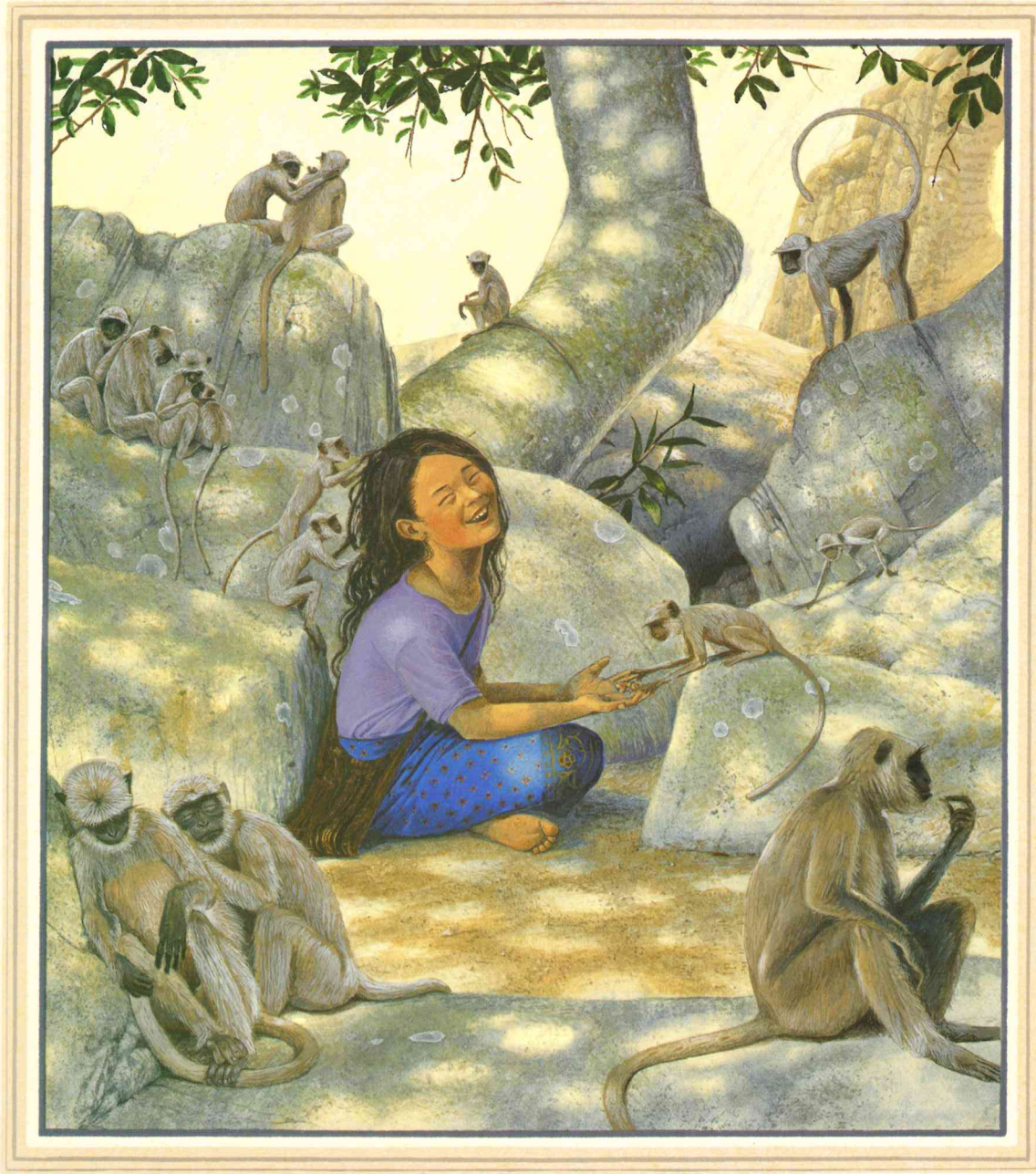
sual the
ys came down into
ntation late in the morning.
new they had arrived when she heard
erseer shouting like a crazy man and beating a
king-pot with a stick to drive them away. The women
d and held their skirts tight to their legs as the monkeys,
g their teeth in grins of fear, fled down the rows of bushes.
; male monkey that Tashi called Rajah came first, then after
e younger males, and after them the mothers with their
hanging beneath them or riding on their backs like jockeys
se race. Tashi grabbed her lunch-bag and followed them.



Tashi and the monkeys met in their usual place, where the endless rows of tea bushes were broken by a jumble of rocks and a tree spread its shadow on the ground. Here she sat and crossed her legs. The monkeys watched her with their deep, serious eyes.

After a while the youngest ones left their mothers and came over to her. There was fruit in her lunch-bag and she shared it. The young monkeys inspected Tashi's fingers one by one. With their own long delicate fingers they combed her thick dark hair. The mothers relaxed, trusting her. They snoozed in small groups or flirted with the young males. Rajah stalked around the edge of the tree-shadow, watching everything.

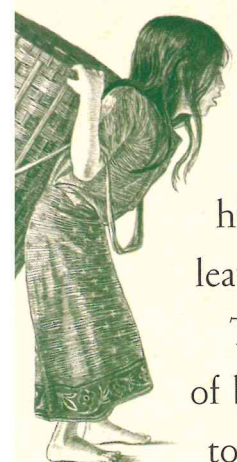
The women stopped work when the sun was a blurred red globe, hanging just above the rows of tea bushes. There was less talk on the way home. The women's tiredness was like a cloud around them. Tashi's mother had bruised-looking eyes. Her cough was worse. Once or twice she stopped walking and pressed her hand to her chest.



next morning there was no crackle from the fire,
no whisper from the kettle, no perfume of sweet tea.
"Hi! Come here, child." Tashi crossed the dim room to her
mother's bed. The cough was hard and sharp like a stick breaking.
Her mother's face was cold but also wet with sweat.
"I'm sick, child. I do not think I can work today."
Tashi ran to the dawn-lit road when she heard the women
coming. Two came into the house: her Aunt Sonam and one
other. They felt her mother's forehead and spoke to each other in
whispers. Sonam brought water and told Tashi to make sure her
mother drank. Then they hurried away to their work.
The next morning was the same. Tashi knew that if her mother
did not work there would be no money. With no money to pay
the doctor, her mother would not get well. If her mother did not
get well, she could not work and there would be no money. The
dilemma went round and round. It was like a snake with its tail in
its mouth and Tashi was frightened by it.
When her mother was asleep again, Tashi dragged the heavy
basket to the door. She found that if she leant her body
against it she could lift the bottom of the basket off the ground.
Like this she began the long walk to the plantation.

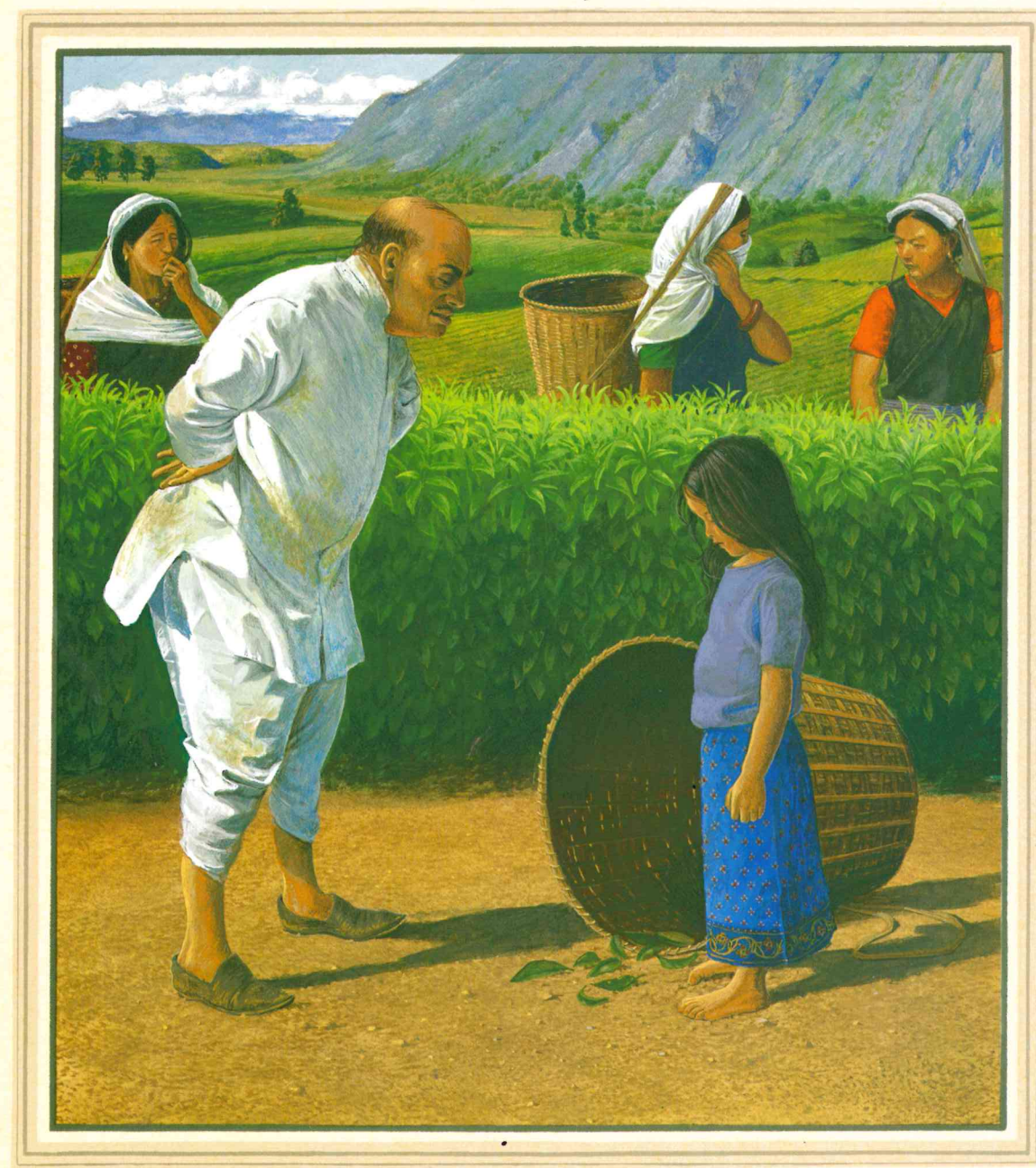


When she got there Tashi could see no one; the bushes
loomed above her. She could hear the shouts of the Overseer
and the calls of the women. She hauled the basket along the
ground until she saw Aunt Sonam plucking the bushes and
putting the leaves over her shoulder into her basket, over
and over again, like a clockwork machine.



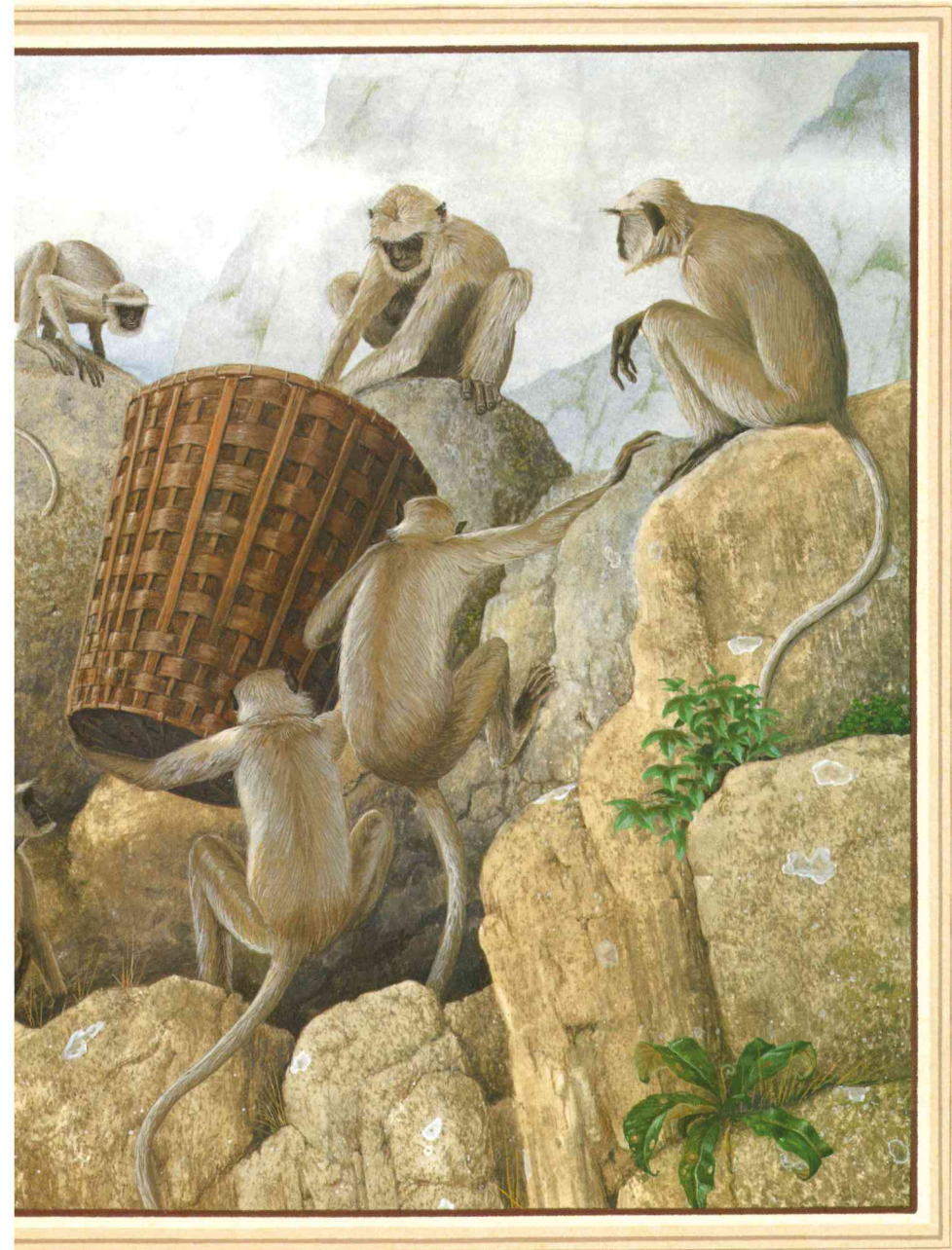
Before Tashi could reach Sonam, a shadow fell upon her. She looked up.
The Overseer stood there, his hands on his hips. Desperately Tashi began to pick leaves, any leaves that she could reach.

The Overseer laughed an ugly laugh full of brown teeth. He called the other women to come and look at this stupid child who thought she could pick tea from bushes that were taller than she. And then he kicked the basket over, spilling the sad dusty leaves onto the ground. Tashi looked up into the face of her Aunt Sonam, but there was no help there. Sonam dared not dare make an enemy of the Overseer, and she pulled down her headscarf over her face and turned away.



hi dragged the empty basket down
 shade of the tree that grew out
 rocks, and when she got there
 and wept with her head in her
 She wept for her mother and
 ant Sonam and for herself. She
 for a long time. Then she wiped
 et eyes with the backs of her hands and looked up.
 onkeys were sitting in the circle of shade, watching
 hey were all watching her – the babies hanging from
 mothers, the older ones quiet for once, Rajah himself
 ; looking at her with his old head tilted curiously to one
 o she told them everything. She told them everything
 se there was no one else to tell.
 en she had finished there was stillness and silence
 ew moments. Then Rajah walked through the
 adow towards her, coming closer than he had ever
 before. He stood and was suddenly taller than Tashi.
 it his long fingers on the rim of the basket and felt
 it carefully. Then, without moving his head, he gave
 h cry: “*Chack! Chack-chack-chack!*”

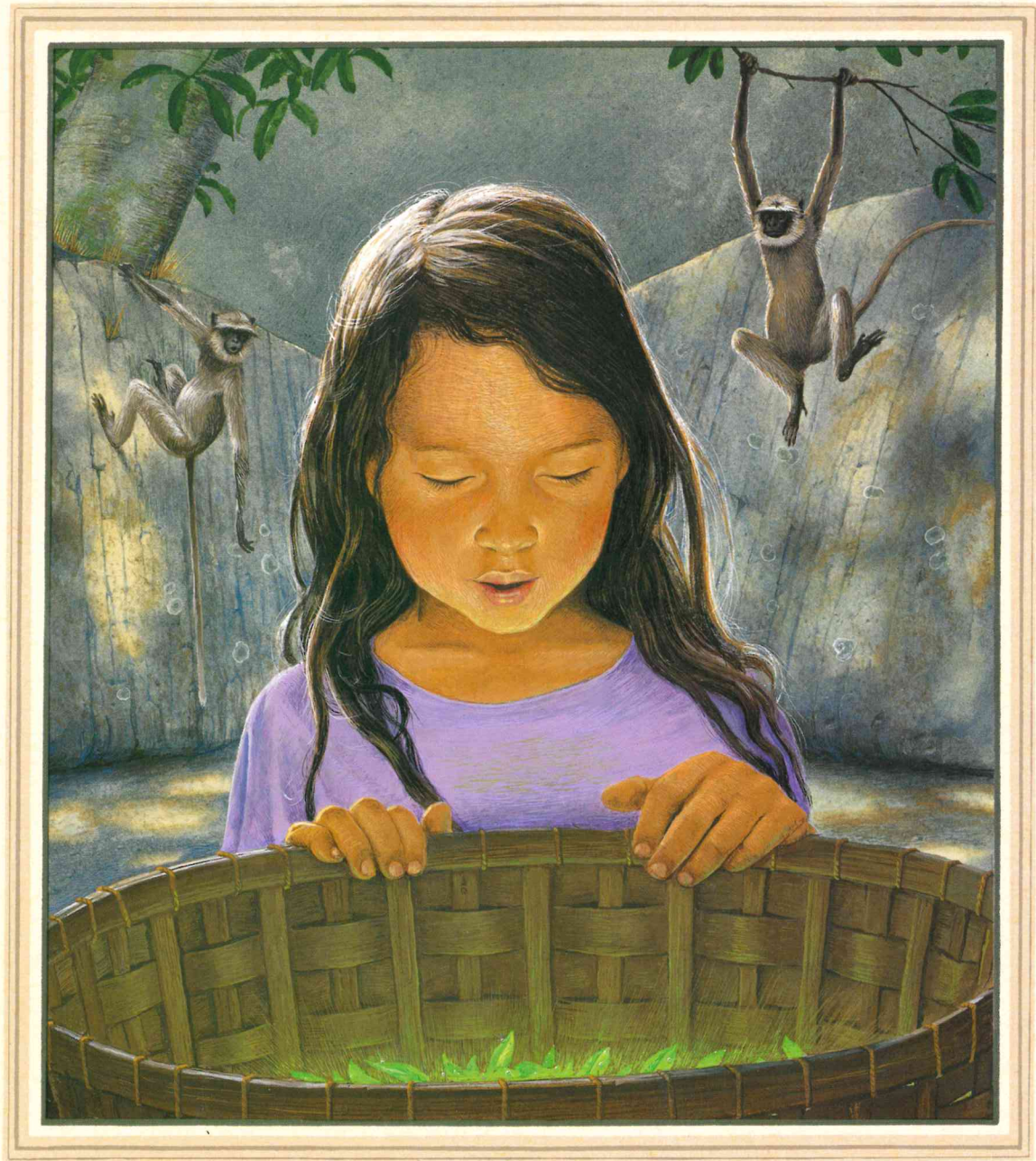




Instantly several of the adult monkeys leapt across the clearing, grabbed the basket, lifted it and then, with amazing strength and speed, carried it up and over the jumbled rocks towards the slopes of the mountains. Higher and higher they went, Rajah leading. In a very short time they and the basket had vanished into the clouds far above the plantation.

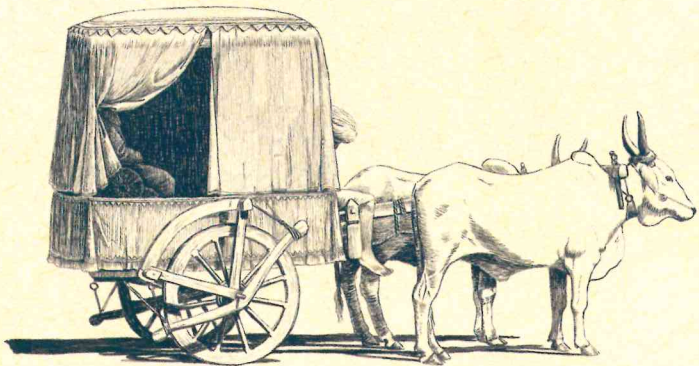
Tashi was too dismayed by the theft of her mother's basket to cry out. She stood watching the monkeys go, and then sat, feeling terribly tired. The young ones came to her. She took the three small bananas that were her lunch and shared them. Feeding the young ones calmed her. After a while she fell asleep.

was awakened by a great outburst of screeching and
 ping. The adults were back, and they were excited,
 ping from branch to rock and rock to branch, calling
 7. The young ones fled from Tashi's lap to their mothers;
 others scolded the males for their madness. Rajah sat
 middle of the shade, ignoring all monkey business.
 as watching Tashi. The basket stood beside him. She
 to it and looked in.
 e basket was almost full of small budding sprigs of
 d Tashi knew straight away that it was unusual. The
 were the colour of emeralds and spangled with tiny
 ets of water so that the basket seemed full of green
 and a rich sweet scent.
 e basket was even harder to manage now that it was
 t took Tashi a long time to drag it through the baking
 between the endless rows of bushes. When she came
 he clearing around the Overseer's station, surprise
 ed her dead. The tea-pickers were standing in a long
 ehind their baskets, whispering and giggling nervously.



shi hauled her basket over to where her aunt stood at
 end of the line. Sonam looked down at the child with
 astonished eyes but did not speak. The Overseer was
 ching about. He looked like a man whose brains were on
 "Silence!" he yelled. "Silence! Stand straight! Be quiet!"
 it it was not the Overseer's mad behaviour that
 rested Tashi. In the open space beside the hut was a cart
 i two wooden wheels. The two enormous oxen that
 pulled it to the plantation stood twitching their tails at
 ersome flies. The driver was a very small man wearing
 ite turban, and he seemed to be asleep.

the cart there was a chair with cushions and a tall
 s, like a throne. It had a canopy of purple silk. And in
 chair, in the purple shadow of the purple silk, sat a man
 e of silver light like the moon.



Overseer spoke. "We are honoured," he said, "we are very honoured to be visited today by His Excellency Royal Tea-Taster himself!" The Overseer turned and made a respectful crouching gesture towards the man who looked like the moon. "As you know, His Excellency the Royal Tea-Taster travels the whole world to find teas that are good enough to be drunk by Her Majesty the Empress!" The tea-pickers whispered to each other. The Overseer went dark in the face.

"Silence! His Excellency the Royal Tea-Taster will now examine the tea in each of your baskets.

And I am sure, quite sure, that he will find that the tea we grow on our plantation is the finest in the world."

The Royal Tea-Taster pulled himself up from his throne and stood in the sunlight. Now Tashi could see him clearly. Gold threads glittered in his blue turban, and his long white coat was so heavily embroidered with silver that it seemed to be made of white fire. His moustache was like a spread of snowy wings.



The Royal Tea-Taster strolled over to the line of women. He reached down into the first basket and picked out a leaf of tea. He held it up and looked at it very closely, examining it. He crushed the leaves and stuck his long nose into his cupped hands and sniffed a long, noisy sniff. Then he tossed the tea aside. He did this a few times along the line, but more often he just glanced at a basket of tea and moved on. The Overseer followed at a respectful distance, his hands rubbing each other, his face wearing a sick and pained grin.

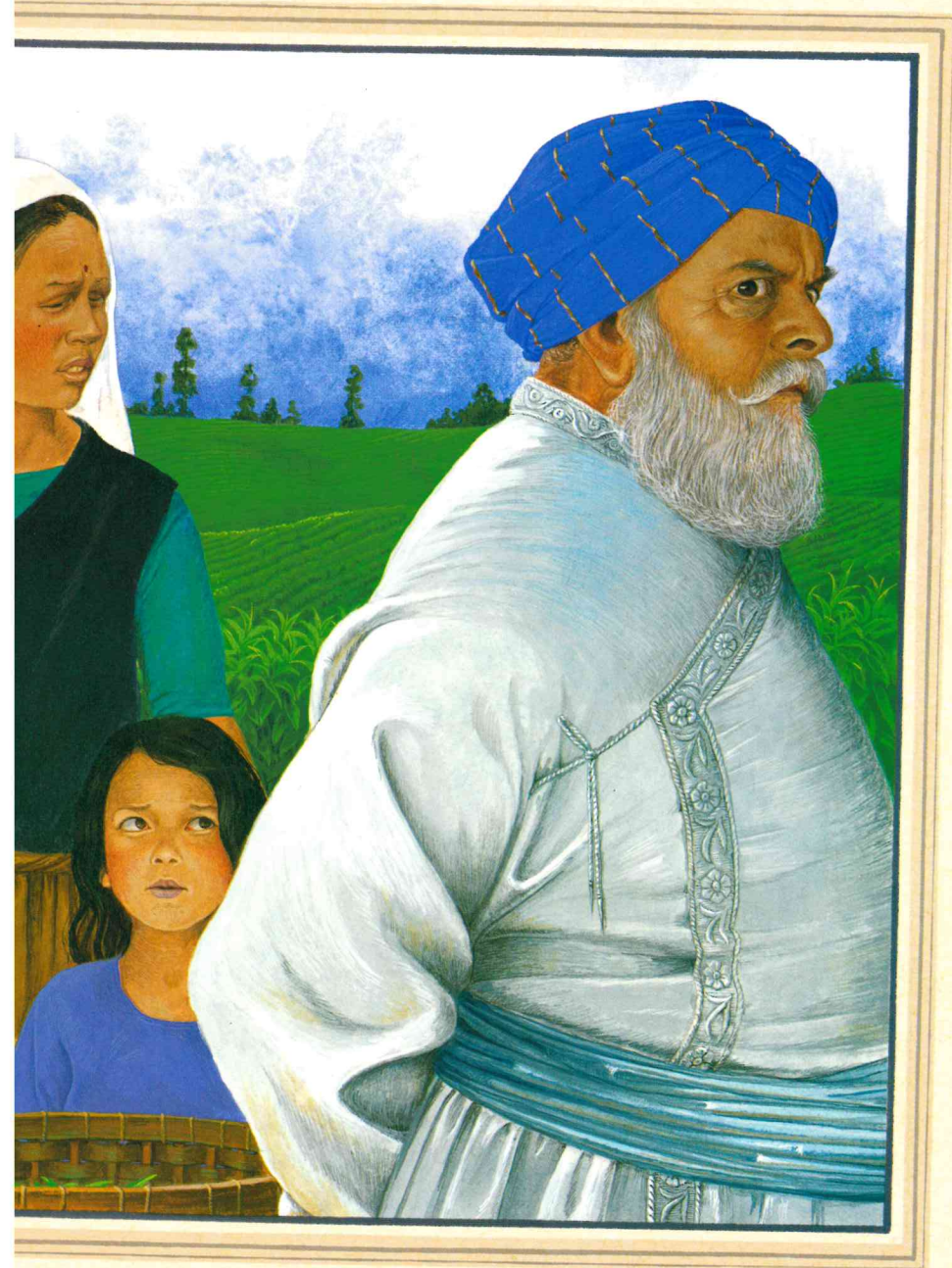
The Royal Tea-Taster was quite close to Sonam and Tashi when the Overseer lost control of himself and dared to speak. "Excellent, sir!" he said. "This tea, our tea: it is very fine, isn't it? Is it not a most beautiful tea?"

The Royal Tea-Taster lifted his nose as if he had smelt a dead rat.

"Your tea," he said, "your tea is ... ordinary."

The Overseer moaned and bent almost double as if he had a sharp pain in his stomach.





The Royal Tea-Taster moved on and at last stood before Sonam and Tashi. Tashi looked up into his eyes, which were almost as deep and dark as the eyes of Rajah.

The Royal Tea-Taster turned to walk away. Then he stopped. His nose twitched.

He came back to the basket that stood in front of Tashi and dipped his plump hand into it, testing the warm dampness of the leaves. He took a single sprig and studied it, twirling it between his fingers. He crushed it and sniffed it, twice.

“Where did you pick this?”

He spoke to Sonam, not to Tashi.

Sonam said, “Sir, I did not pick it. This child did. Her name is Tashi. She is the daughter of my sister, who is sick.”

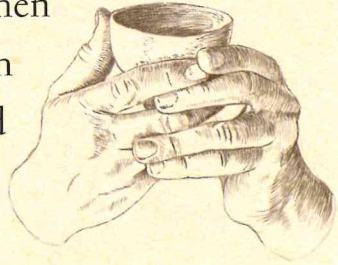
The Royal Tea-Taster took a step back so that he could see Tashi over the gleaming bulge of his belly. His look was very stern. He lifted a hand and clicked his fingers.

iny sleeping man on the cart immediately woke up, to the ground and ran first to the back of the cart and ross to where the Royal Tea-Taster stood. In one hand ed a leather bag and in the other a small iron dish of 5 charcoal, trailing smoke. He set the dish of charcoal on and and took from the bag a small copper kettle and a usk. He poured water from the flask into the kettle and kettle on the fire and blew furiously onto the charcoal burned red.

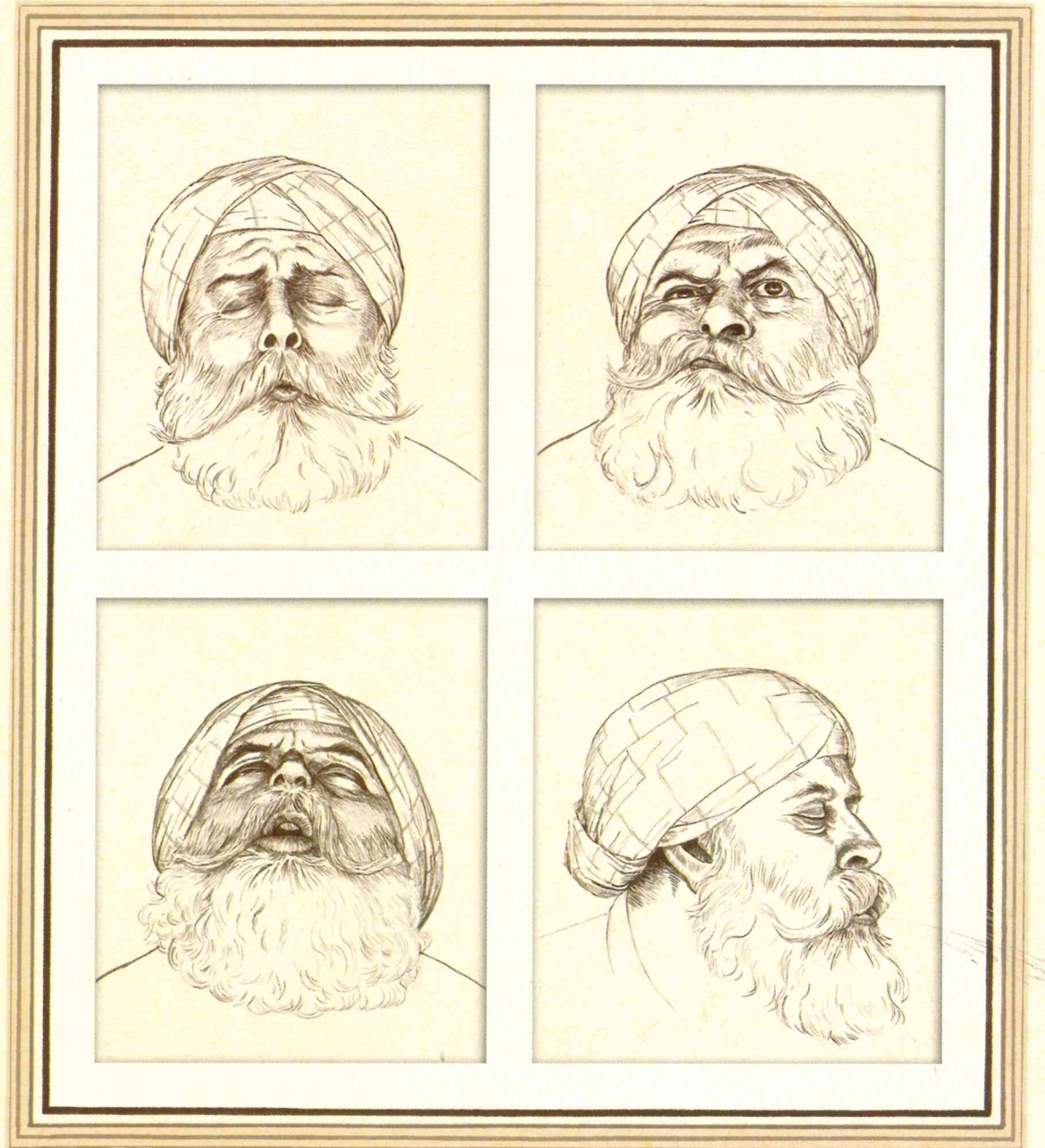
d of the kettle rattled when the water boiled. The little man – who was in fact the Deputy Chief Tea-Boiler – reached into the bag again and took out a milk-white porcelain bowl. It was so thin that Tashi could see the shadow of the little man's fingers through it. He put three sprigs of Tashi's tea into the bowl, poured boiling water onto them ded the bowl to the Royal Tea-Taster. The Royal Tea-eld the bowl close to his nose and bent over. The little n covered the Royal Tea-Taster's head and the bowl with cloth. Tashi wanted to giggle but did not dare.



There was silence for several moments. Then from under the cloth there came a good deal of sniffing and snuffling: short snuffles and then some long deep sniffs and then the sound of gasping that comes before a sneeze. Then silence. A hand came out from under the cloth. The fingers clicked again and the little man reached up and lifted the cloth over the Royal Tea-Taster's head.



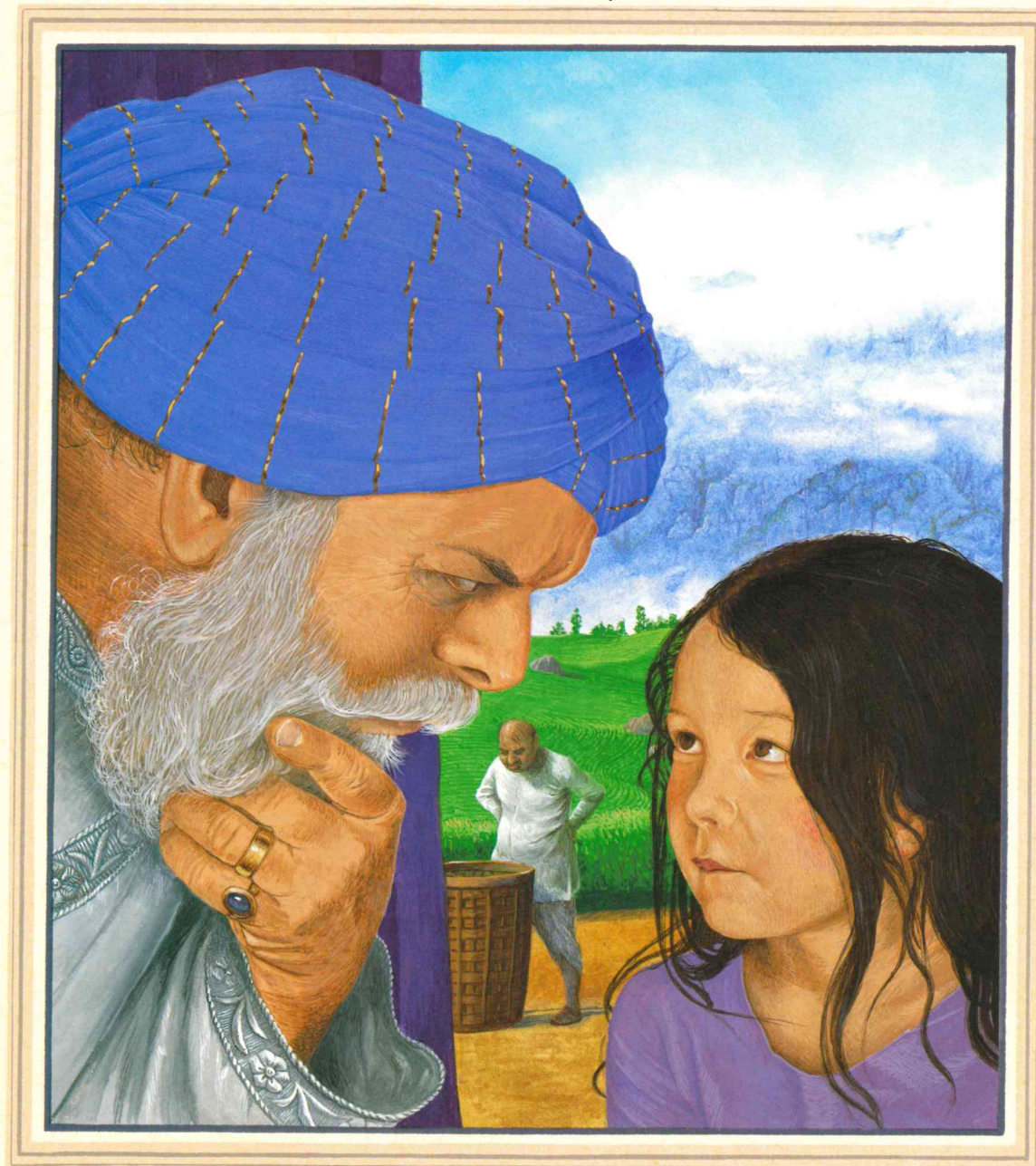
When Tashi saw his face, the Royal Tea-Taster no longer looked angry. He looked like a man who had seen an angel. He lifted the cup to his lips and sucked in tea with a tremendous snort slurping sound, which made Tashi jump. He rolled the tea around inside his mouth, first one cheek bulging, then the other. He opened his mouth slightly and drew in more air, gurgling. Then he turned his head and – *pfft!* – spat the tea onto the ground. Now he stood still with his eyes closed, breathing in and out through his mouth. At last the Royal Tea-Taster opened his eyes and sighed a sigh of pure joy. His smile was like the sun rising out of the clouds as he beamed down at Tashi. "Come with me," he said.



took her by the hand and together they walked
to the ox-cart. The Royal Tea-Taster studied the
anxious child who stood before him.

"my life," he said, "I have tasted many, many kinds
Perhaps a thousand kinds of tea. But until today
I have tasted Cloud Tea only twice, and the last time was
years ago. And you know why, don't you?"
Tashi said nothing because she could not think of
anything to say.

"Of course you know. You know that Cloud Tea is
the most impossible to find and even more difficult to
obtain because it grows up there." He pointed a finger
toward the mountains where the mountains were wrapped in cloud.
"It is the most magical and delicious tea in the world
because it grows wild in high, dangerous places where men
are afraid to go." He bent down to Tashi and spoke in
a low voice. "So I ask myself this: how could a small child
have gathered this tea? Tell me, are you able to fly?"



ni lowered her eyes. Her tongue felt too big for her mouth. She knew that if she told this man the truth he would not believe her. She wondered if she was still asleep or dreaming.

"Yes, sir," she said. "I cannot fly."

A small child cannot tell the Royal Tea-Taster how she found the most valuable tea in the world. Is that correct?"

ni said, "Yes." It was the hardest thing she'd ever had to do.

The Royal Tea-Taster nodded seriously. "Very well, yes."

"I have my secrets too." And then he smiled. "Come back soon."

"Yes," he said, "and listen carefully. In exactly one year from now I will come here again. And I will come here again the year after that, and every year after that. And each time you are here I want you to bring me a basket of Cloud Tea. And each time you bring me a basket of Cloud Tea I will give you one of these."

He held out a silk pouch that was small but heavy. Tashi

opened it and looked inside. The coins were fat and round

and of gold, and there were many of them.

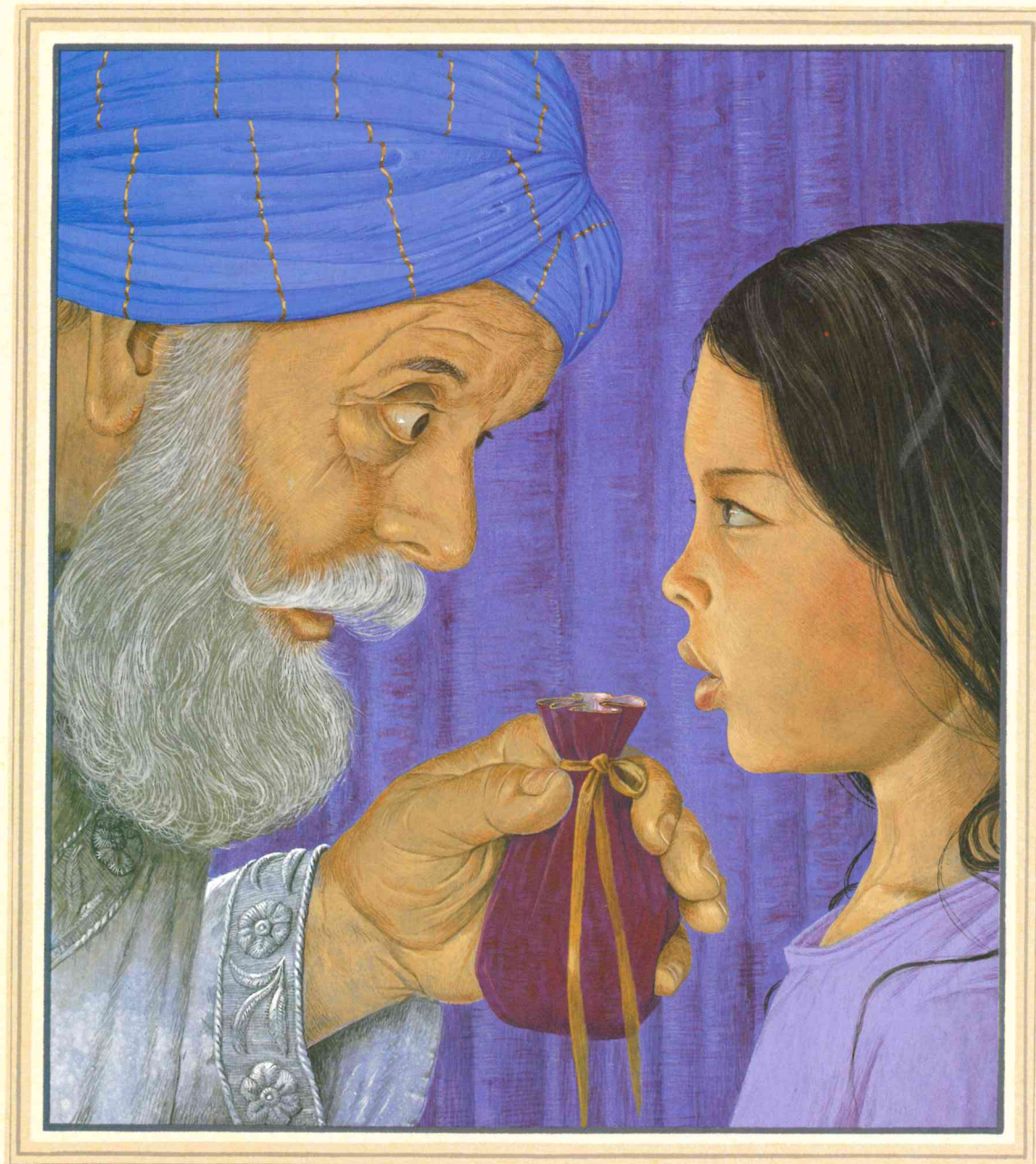
of gold, and there were many of them.

of gold, and there were many of them.

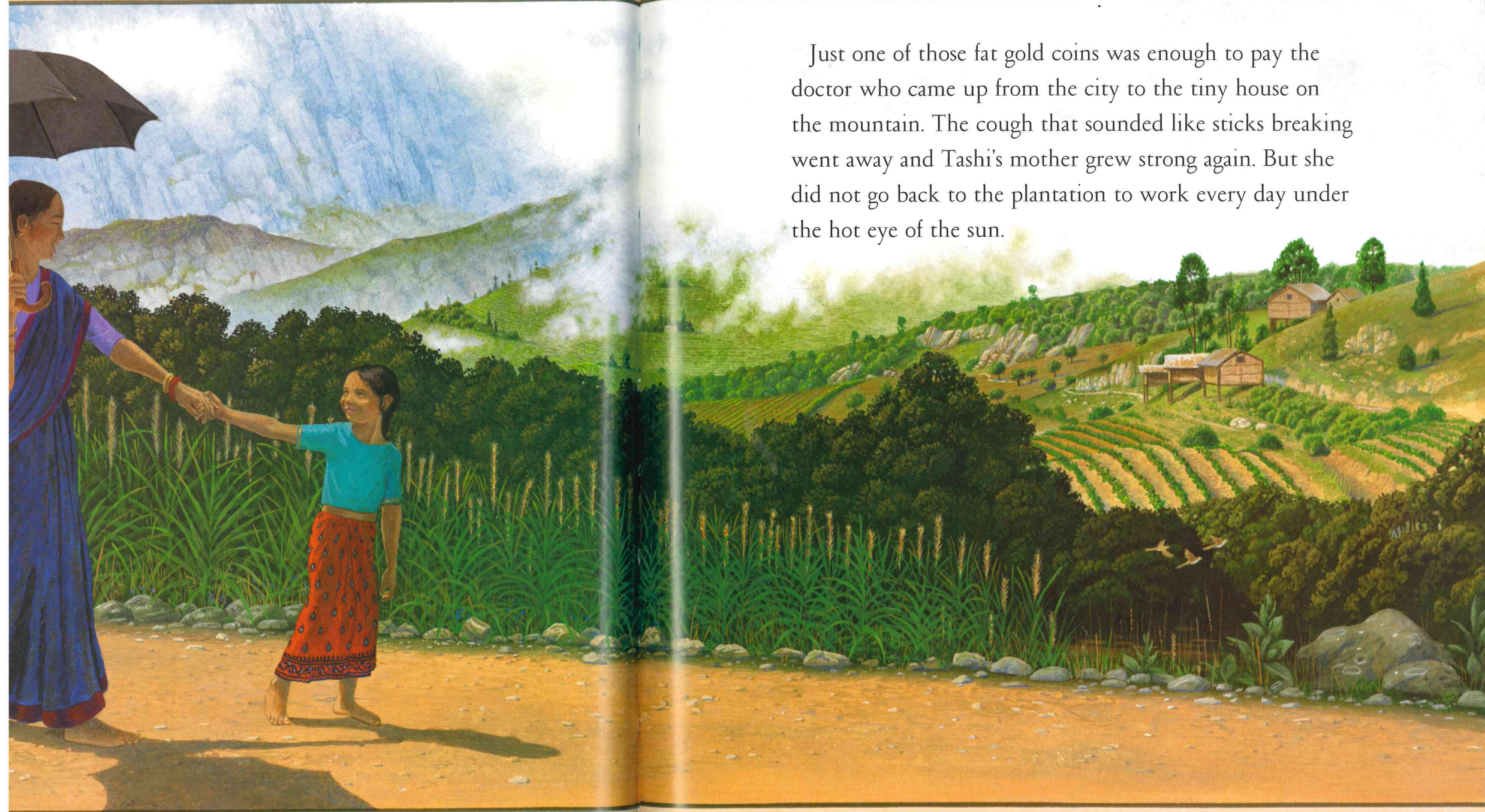
of gold, and there were many of them.

of gold, and there were many of them.

of gold, and there were many of them.



Just one of those fat gold coins was enough to pay the doctor who came up from the city to the tiny house on the mountain. The cough that sounded like sticks breaking went away and Tashi's mother grew strong again. But she did not go back to the plantation to work every day under the hot eye of the sun.

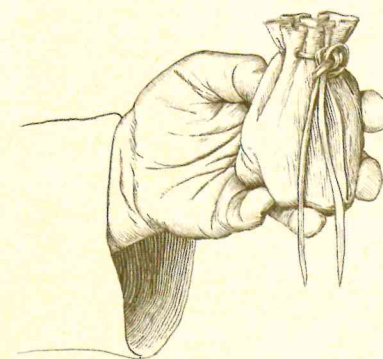


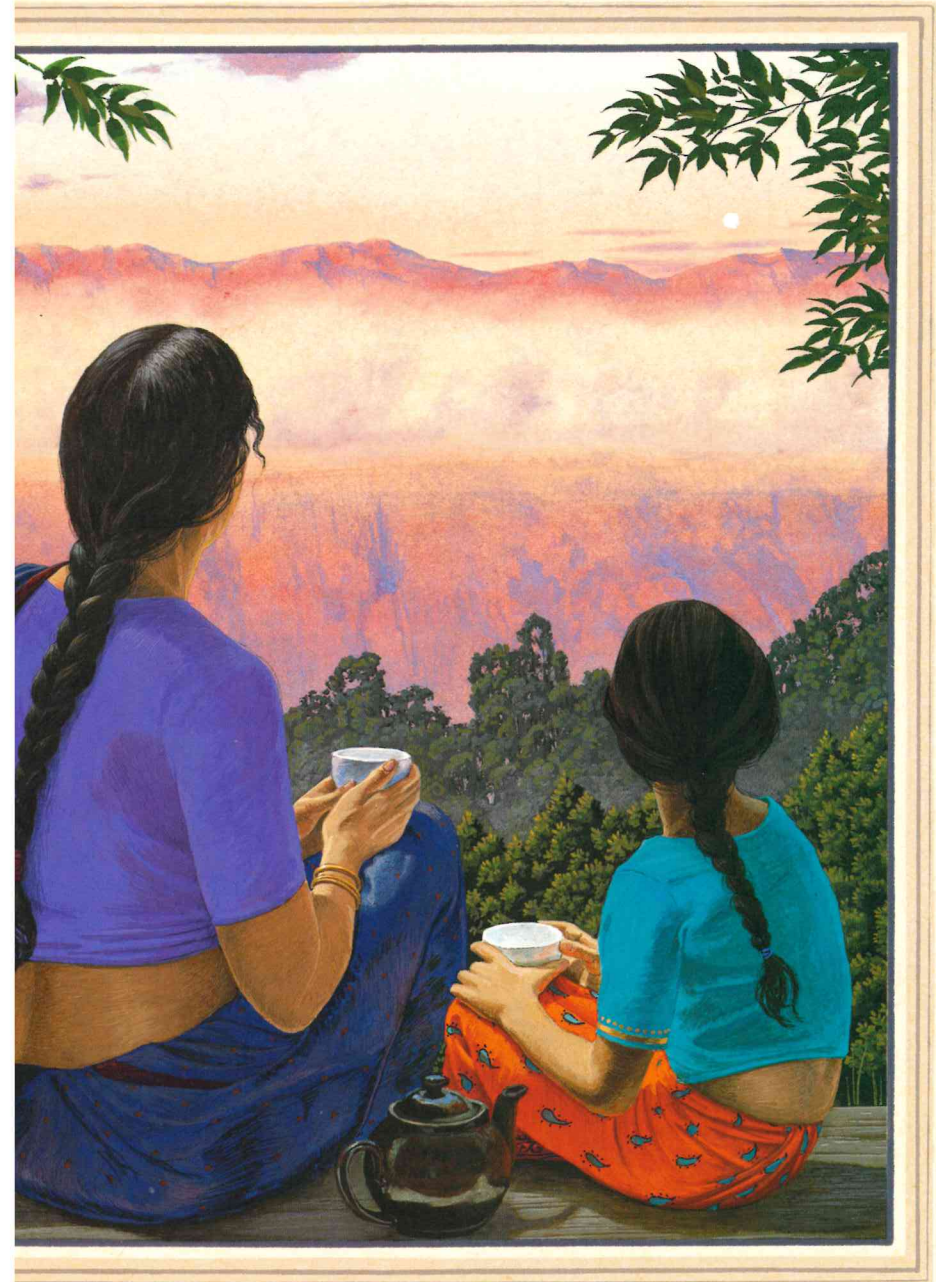


A year later, just one of the fat gold coins was also enough to pay for fruit to fill the tea-basket: juicy mangoes, sleek bananas, red-jewelled pomegranates, the rosiest of apples, the most perfect of peaches. In the shadow of the tree that grew from the jumbled rocks, the monkeys feasted.

And afterwards, while Tashi dozed with the babies on her lap, Rajah and the big monkeys stole away up the mountain with the empty basket and brought it back filled with the magical green glow of Cloud Tea.

Later, the ox-cart came; a plump hand reached out of the purple shade and dropped a plump silk pouch into Tashi's palm.





There are only three people in the world who drink Cloud Tea. One of them is a little old woman who is called the Empress of All the Known World and Other Bits That Have Not Been Discovered Yet. The other two are a retired tea-picker and her daughter, who live in a village among mountains whose tops are lost in clouds.

