

Three Friends - from the Buddha Jatakas

There was a lake in a forest. In the lake lived a tortoise. In the hollow of a tree that stood near the lake lived a woodpecker. And in a bush that had grown between the lake and the tree lived an antelope.

The three were friends.

One day, a hunter who lived on the fringe of the forest saw the charming antelope. In the evening he planted a snare near the lake.

At night, the antelope was trapped. He cried out. The tortoise came out of the lake and the woodpecker hopped down from his shelter. They watched the plight of their friend.

"Tortoise dear, try to cut the snare by your teets. I will do my best to delay the hunter" said the woodpecker.

The tortoise began his work immediately. But the leather ropes of the snare were tough. It took him long and hard labour to make any headway.

The woodpecker sat atop a tree in front of the hunter's hut. From time to time he flew down to the lake-side to encourage the tortoise in his work and to keep the antelope's spirits up.

Before dawn, the hunter came out of his hut, a dagger in hand. Instantly the woodpecker made a dive and struck him in the face.

"This is a bad omen," said the hunter. He went back into his hut and waited for a while. Then, he came out through the door at the back. The woodpecker had anticipated this. He made a dive again and stuck him in the face.

"An inauspicious beginning of the day!" grumbled the hunter to himself. He reentered his hut and waited till the sunrise.

The woodpecker made a dive again when the hunter started on his journey for the third time. But the fellow raised his dagger to strike the bird. The woodpecker realised that he had been determined to proceed on his way.

The woodpecker flew down to the lake-side. "Quick, friend, quick," he told the tortoise. The poor tortoise was bleeding in his mouth. There was still a knot to be cut.

The hunter was approaching the spot. The deer gave a pull. The remaining knot got snapped. He ran away.

But the hunter was there before the tired tortoise could enter the lake. He picked up the tortoise and put him in his bag and began walking towards his hut.

The antelope saw that the tortoise was going to lose his life. He appeared before the hunter and ambled about as if he had been wounded. The hunter grew hopeful of catching him. He kept his bag down and followed that antelope. The antelope was never too fast. The hunter was about to lay his hand on him several times.

The antelope led the hunter farther and farther. Then suddenly, he took to a short cut and, at a lightning speed, reached the spot where the bag with the tortoise lay. With his horns, he carried the bag to the lake side. Then he pierced it open. The tortoise came out. "Enter the water immediately, friend!" said the antelope and he hid in the bush.

Minutes later, the hunter reached there to find his bag empty and torn.

"It is a bad day!" he muttered and retired to his hut.

The three friends went over to the other side of the lake. They lived long and lived happily.