Ja 357 — Latukika Jātaka

English translation by H. T. Francis and R. A. Neil.

Source: https://raw.githubusercontent.com/suttacentral/sc-data/2d9ca8da858f94302ed6783e2717bf73d651881b/html_text/en/pli/sutta/kn/ja/vol3/ja357.html

Source revision: 2d9ca8da858f94302ed6783e2717bf73d651881b

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Edited by E. B. Cowell

Original edition: Cambridge University Press, volume 3, 1897

Pinned source revision: https://github.com/suttacentral/sc-data/commit/2d9ca8da858f94302ed6783e2717bf73d651881b

Scope: Complete numbered source article from the traditional Jātaka commentary; canonical verses appear in story context. This is not a verse-only edition.

Changes: Converted the pinned SuttaCentral HTML article to plain text; removed inline print page-reference labels and normalized whitespace. The original source retains references.

Text

“Elephant of sixty years,” etc.—This was a story told by the Master while dwelling in the Bamboo Grove, concerning Devadatta. One day they raised a discussion in the Hall of Truth, saying, “Sirs, Devadatta is harsh, cruel, and violent. He has not an atom of pity for mortals.” When the Master came, he inquired what was the topic the Brethren were assembled to discuss, and on hearing what it was, he said, “Brethren, not now only, but formerly also he was pitiless.” And herewith he told a story of the past.

Once upon a time when Brahmadatta was reigning in Benares, the Bodhisatta came to life as a young elephant, and growing up a fine comely beast, he became the leader of the herd, with a following of eighty thousand elephants, and dwelt in the Himalayas. At that time a quail laid her eggs in the feeding-ground of the elephants. When the eggs were ready to be hatched, the young birds broke the shells and came out. Before their wings had grown, and when they were still unable to fly, the Great Being with his following of eighty thousand elephants, in ranging about for food, came to this spot. On seeing them the quail thought, “This royal elephant will trample on my young ones and kill them. Lo! I will implore his righteous protection for the defence of my brood.” Then she raised her two wings and standing before him repeated the first stanza—

Elephant of sixty years,

Forest lord amongst thy peers,

I am but a puny bird,

Thou a leader of the herd;

With my wings I homage pay,

Spare my little ones, I pray.

The Great Being said, “O quail, be not troubled. I will protect thy offspring.” And standing over the young birds, while the eighty thousand elephants passed by, he thus addressed the quail: “Behind us comes a solitary rogue elephant. He will not do our bidding. When he comes, do thou entreat him too, and so insure the safety of thy offspring.” And with these words he made off. And the quail went forth to meet the other elephant, and with both wings uplifted, making respectful salutation, she spoke the second stanza—

Roaming over hill and dale

Cherishing thy lonely way,

Thee, O forest king, I hail,

And with wings my homage pay.

I am but a wretched quail,

Spare my tender brood to slay.

On hearing her words, the elephant spoke the third stanza—

I will slay thy young ones, quail;

What can thy poor help avail?

My left foot can crush with ease

Many thousand birds like these.

And so saying, with his foot he crushed the young birds to atoms, and staling over them washed them away in a flood of water, and went off loudly trumpeting. The quail sat down on the bough of a tree and said, “Then be off with you and trumpet away. You shall very soon see what I will do. You little know what a difference there is between strength of body and strength of mind. Well! I will teach you this lesson.” And thus threatening him she repeated the fourth stanza—

Power abused is not all gain,

Power is often folly’s bane.

Beast that didst my young ones kill,

I will work thee mischief still.

And so saying, shortly afterwards she did a good turn to a crow, and when the crow, who was highly pleased, asked, “What can I do for you?” the quail said, “There is nothing else, Sir, to be done, but I shall expect you to strike with your beak and to peck out the eyes of this rogue elephant.” The crow readily assented, and the quail then did a service to a blue fly, and when the fly asked, “What can I do for you?” she said, “When the eyes of this rogue elephant have been put out by the crow, then I want you to let fall a nit upon them.” The fly agreed, and then the quail did a kindness to a frog, and when the frog asked what it was to do, she said, “When this rogue elephant becomes blind, and shall be searching for water to drink, then take your stand and utter a croak on the top of a mountain, and when he has climbed to the top, come down and croak again at the bottom of the precipice. This much I shall look for at your hands.” After hearing what the quail said, the frog readily assented. So one day the crow with its beak pecked out both the eyes of the elephant, and the fly dropped its eggs upon them, and the elephant being eaten up with maggots was maddened by the pain, and overcome with thirst wandered about seeking for water to drink. At this moment the frog standing on the top of a mountain uttered a croak. Thought the elephant, “There must be water there,” and climbed up the mountain. Then the frog descended, and standing at the bottom croaked again. The elephant thought, “There will be water there” and moved forward towards the precipice, and rolling over fell to the bottom of the mountain and was killed. When the quail knew that the elephant was dead, she said, “I have seen the back of mine enemy,” and in a high state of delight strutted over his body, and passed away to fare according to her deeds.

The Master said, “Brethren, one ought not to incur the hostility of anyone. These four creatures, by combining together, brought about the destruction of this elephant, strong as he was.

A quail with crow, blue fly and frog allied

Once proved the issue of a deadly feud.

Through them king elephant untimely died:

Therefore all quarrelling should be eschewed.”

Uttering this stanza inspired by Perfect Wisdom, he thus identified the Birth: “At that time Devadatta was the rogue elephant, and I myself was the leader of the herd of elephants.”

The Jātaka, or Stories of the Buddha’s Former Births, edited by E.B. Cowell, published by The Cambridge University Press.

Vol. 1, translated by Robert Chalmers, 1895.

Vol. 2, translated by W.H.D. Rouse, 1895.

Vol. 3, translated by H.T. Francis and R.A. Neil, 1897.

Vol. 4, translated by W.H.D. Rouse, 1901.

Vol. 5, translated by H.T. Francis, 1905.

Vol. 6, translated by E.B. Cowell and W.H.D. Rouse, 1907.

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