Ja 438 — Tittira Jātaka

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

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Edited by E. B. Cowell

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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

“Thy harmless offspring,” etc.—This story the Master, while dwelling at Vulture Peak, told concerning the going about of Devadatta to slay him. It was at this time that they started a discussion in the Hall of Truth, saying, “Alas! Sirs, how shameless and base was Devadatta. Joining himself to Ajatasattu, he formed a plot to kill the excellent and supreme Buddha, by the suborning of archers, the hurling of a rock, and the letting loose of Nalagiri.” The Master came and inquired of the Brethren what they were discussing in their assembly, and on being told what it was said, “ Not only now, but formerly too, Devadatta went about to kill me, but now he cannot so much as frighten me,” and he related an old-world legend.

Once upon a time in the reign of Brahmadatta, king of Benares, a world-renowned professor at Benares gave instruction in science to five hundred young brahmins. One day he thought, “So long as I dwell here, I meet with hindrances to the religious life, and my pupils are not perfected in their studies. I will retire into a forest home on the slopes of the Himalayas and carry on my teaching there.” He told his pupils, and, bidding them bring sesame, husked rice, oil, garments and such like, he went into the forest and building a hut of leaves took up his abode close by the highway. His pupils too each built a hut for himself. Their kinsfolk sent rice and the like, and the natives of the country saying, “A famous professor, they say, is living in such and such a place in the forest, and giving lessons in science,” brought presents of rice, and the foresters also offered their gifts, while a certain man gave a milch cow and a calf, to supply them with milk. Now a lizard along with her two young ones came to dwell in the hut of the teacher, and a lion and a tiger ministered to him. A partridge too constantly resided there, and from hearing their master teach sacred texts to his pupils, the partridge got to know three Vedas. And the young brahmins became very friendly with the bird. By and bye before the youths had attained to proficiency in the sciences, their master died. His pupils had his body burnt, set up a tope of sand over his ashes, and with weeping and lamentation adorned it with all manner of flowers. So the partridge asked them why they wept. “Our master,” they replied, “has died while our studies are still incomplete.” “If this is so, do not be distressed: I will

teach you science." "How do you know it?" "I used to listen to your master, while he was teaching you, and got up three Vedas by heart." "Then do you impart to us what you have learned by heart." The partridge said, "Well, listen," and he expounded knotty points to them, as easily as one lets down a stream from a mountain height. The young brahmins were highly delighted and acquired science from the learned partridge. And the bird stood in the place of the far-famed teacher, and gave lectures in science. The youths made him a golden cage and fastening an awning over it, they served him with honey and parched grain in a golden dish and presenting him with divers coloured flowers, they paid great honour to the bird. It was blazed abroad throughout all India that a partridge in a forest was instructing five hundred young brahmins in sacred texts. At that time men proclaimed a high festival—it was like a gathering together of the people on a mountain top. The parents of the youths sent a message for their sons to come and see the festival. They told the partridge, and entrusting the learned bird and all the hermitage to the care of the lizard, they left for their several cities. At that moment an ill-conditioned wicked ascetic wandering about hither and thither came to this spot. The lizard on seeing him entered into friendly talk with him, saying, "In such and such a place you will find rice, oil and such like; boil some rice and enjoy yourself," and so saying he went off in quest of his own food. Early in the morning the wretch boiled his rice, and killed and ate the two young lizards, making a dainty dish of them. At midday he killed and ate the learned partridge and the calf, and in the evening no sooner did he see the cow had come home than he killed her too and ate the flesh. Then he lay down grunting at the foot of a tree and fell asleep. In the evening the lizard came back and missing her young ones went about looking for them. A tree-sprite observing the lizard all of a tremble because she could not find her young ones, by an exercise of divine power stood in the hollow of the trunk of the tree and said, "Cease trembling, lizard: your young ones and the partridge and the calf and cow have been killed by this wicked fellow. Give him a bite in the neck, and so bring about his death." And thus talking with the lizard the deity spoke the first stanza:

Thy harmless offspring he did eat,

Though thou didst rice in plenty give;

Thy teeth make in his flesh to meet,

Nor let the wretch escape alive.

Then the lizard repeated two stanzas:

Filth doth his greedy soul, like nurse's garb, besmear,

His person all is proof against my fangs, I fear.

Flaws by the base ingrate are everywhere espied,

Not by the gift of worlds can he be satisfied.

The lizard so saying thought, “This fellow will wake up and eat me,” and to save her own life she fled. Now the lion and the tiger were on very friendly terms with the partridge. Sometimes they used to come and see the partridge, and sometimes the partridge went and taught the Law to them. To-day the lion said to the tiger, “It is a long time since we saw the partridge; it must be seven or eight days: go and bring back news of him.” The tiger readily assented, and he arrived at the place the very moment that the lizard had run away, and found the vile wretch sleeping. In his matted locks were to be seen some feathers of the partridge, and close by appeared the bones of the cow and calf. King tiger seeing all this and missing the partridge from his golden cage thought, “These creatures must have been killed by this wicked fellow,” and he roused him by a kick. At the sight of the tiger the man was terribly frightened. Then the tiger asked, “Did you kill and eat these creatures?” “I neither killed nor ate them.” “Vile wretch, if you did not kill them, tell me who else would? And if you do not tell me, you are a dead man:” Frightened for his life he said, “Yes, sir, I did kill and eat the young lizards and the cow and the calf, but I did not kill the partridge.” And though he protested much, the tiger did not believe him but asked, “Whence did you come here?” “My lord, I hawked about merchant’s wares for a living in the Kalinga country, and after trying one thing and another I have come here.” But when the man had told him everything that he had done, the tiger said, “You wicked fellow, if you did not kill the partridge, who else could have done so? Come, I shall bring you before the lion, the king of beasts.” So the tiger went off, driving the man before him. When the lion saw the tiger bringing the man with him, putting it in the form of a question he spoke the fourth stanza:

Why thus in haste, Subahu, art thou here,

And why with thee does this good youth appear?

What need for urgency is here, I pray?

Quick, tell me truly and without delay.

On hearing this the tiger spoke the fifth stanza:

The partridge, Sire, our very worthy friend,

I doubt, to-day has come to a bad end:

This fellow’s antecedents make me fear

We may ill news of our good partridge hear.

Then the lion spoke the sixth stanza:

What may the fellow’s antecedents be,

And what the sins that he confessed to thee,

To make thee doubt that some misfortune may

Have fallen on the learned bird to-day?

Then in answer to him king tiger repeated the remaining verses:

As pedlar thro' Kalinga land

Rough roads he travelled, staff in hand;

With acrobats he has been found,

And harmless beast in toils has bound;

With dicers too has often played,

And snares for little birds has laid;

In crowds with cudgel-sticks has fought,

And gain by measuring corn has sought:

False to his vows, in midnight fray

Wounded, he washed the blood away:

His hands he burned thro' being bold

To snatch at food too hot to hold.

Such was the life I heard he led,

Such are the sins upon his head,

And since we know the cow is dead,

And feathers midst his locks appear,

I greatly for friend partridge fear.

The lion asked the man, "Did you kill the learned partridge?" "Yes, my lord, I did." The lion on hearing him speak the truth, was anxious to let him go, but king tiger said, "The villain deserves to die," and then and there rent him with his teeth. Then he dug a pit and threw the body into it. The young brahmins when they returned home, not finding the partridge, with weeping and lamentation left the place.

The Master ended his lesson saying, “Thus, Brethren, did Devadatta of old too go about to kill me,” and he identified the Birth: “At that time the ascetic was Devadatta, the lizard Kisagotami, the tiger Moggallana, the lion Sariputta, the world-renowned teacher Kassapa, and the learned partridge was myself.”

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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Prepared for SuttaCentral by Bhikkhu Sujato.