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THE FRIEND BESIDE THE POOL

a short story by DAVID BRENDAN HOPES

Prince Siddhartha Gautama had seen the cat many times, though it was cunningly concealed under the overhanging leaves at the edge of the palace-garden pool. The cat was white, and so not quite as well hidden as it probably thought it was, despite the long shadows of morning. Siddhartha Gautama did not speak, and neither did the cat, until one morning, when the prince noticed that the cat had been staring at him for a long time.

“Good morning,” said Siddhartha Gautama.

“Good morning,” said the cat.

“You were staring at me, friend cat.”

“A cat can look at a prince,” answered the cat, with a bit of an edge to his voice.

At other times it would have been the cat’s practice to turn and slink away, social requirements having been satisfied, into his inscrutable feline solitude, but this time he stayed where

he was, one white forepaw flush against the other in the shade at the pool's edge.

Siddhartha Gautama said, "What shall I call you, friend beside the pool?"

"Call me 'the cat.' I am the cat."

"But surely you have a name. Did your master or mistress not give you a name?"

"I have no master and no mistress. No one has named me." Then he thought for a moment and added, "You may call me 'Friend Beside The Pool.'"

"Very well, Friend Beside The Pool," said Siddhartha Gautama, "I am —"

"I know who you are. You are the Buddha That Is To Be."

"That is by no means certain," answered Siddhartha Gautama.

"I know what I know," replied the Friend Beside The Pool.

Many creatures knew Prince Siddhartha Gautama, who was the son of a king and the husband of a princess and the father of a prince. The birds knew him because he tied bells on his pet cats so they could not catch the birds unaware in the garden. The snakes knew him because he forbade his servants to trample them underfoot on the paths. The tigers knew him because he walked through the forest near the palace unarmed and unafraid, and this confused them, so that sometimes in his journeys he would be trailed by a long line of tigers, following him, bewildered, watching.

"I am a free cat," the cat said. "There is no bell on my collar. Indeed, I have no collar."

Prince Siddhartha Gautama laughed and said, "Then I pray you have mercy on the birds in my garden, little one!"

"There are birds enough in the forest that are not under the watchful eye of a prince."

"Why do you sit mornings under the leaves by the pool?"

"The leaves are cool, and the pool is full of fish — fat, stupid ones, I might add."

"There is a wide world out there, other thickets, other pools teeming with fish," said Siddhartha Gautama.

The cat answered, "This is all the pools. These are all the fish."

"I see. Well, you could come into the palace, and I would feed you scraps from my table. If you don't like me, you could find the pretty daughter of a wealthy nobleman and have your food in an alabaster bowl and sleep in your mistress's bed on rainy nights."

The Friend Beside The Pool licked one forepaw and said, "I do not think so."

Siddhartha Gautama regarded the little white creature for

a moment. Then he said, "Friend Beside The Pool, may I pick you up and scratch behind your ears?"

"You may," said the cat, and the prince lifted him up and scratched behind his ears. The cat purred and narrowed his eyes and worked his claws gently against the man's chest.

"You are heavier than you look," said Siddhartha Gautama.

"The fish in the pool are fat and many," replied the cat.

But there was more to it than that. As Siddhartha Gautama held the cat, it grew heavier and heavier, and the gentle kneading on his chest began to draw blood until finally he had to put the animal down.

"I was not quite finished having my ears scratched," said the cat.

"You were too heavy, O Friend Beside The Pool. Your claws were drawing blood, and I conclude that what I see of you is not all there is. Who are you?"

"O Buddha That Is To Be, you would take the weight of the world on your shoulders, but you cannot hold up even one little cat, whom you would have sleep at a young girl's side. I might, if I were concerned over such things, fear for this world."

The cat padded away and did not come back for a long time. As the days went by, Prince Siddhartha Gautama missed the cat. It was sleek, after all, and its whiteness was beautiful amid the blue and green shadows of the garden. Besides, their conversation had ended before he had quite understood what the cat meant. There were many questions he still wanted to ask, and though he addressed a variety of queries to the fruit trees and the parrots and the cobras, none of them could answer the questions that lay heaviest on his heart.

So, for the first time, Siddhartha Gautama left the palace and walked the streets of the city, calling, "Friend Beside The Pool!" People looked at him strangely or, when they discovered he was looking for a cat, brought him their own cats to talk to, if that was his pleasure. But he did not find the mysterious white cat who'd fished in his garden pool.

While he was out searching for the Friend Beside The Pool, the prince saw something very strange — much stranger, in his experience, than a talking cat. He saw a woman lying just inside an open doorway. She was groaning and holding her hands over her face and rocking slowly from side to side. Siddhartha Gautama came to the open door and said, "Mother, what is the matter?"

She dropped her hands from her face, which was covered with terrible sores. When the woman saw who had spoken, she quickly covered her face again. "I am sick. I am sick and in pain. You must come from the palace, where nobody is ever sick or in pain."

Siddhartha Gautama went back to the palace that night very puzzled. For it was true, to his knowledge, that no one in the palace was ever sick. What he didn't know was that, if a woman fell ill, she was whisked away in secret until she recovered, so that the prince would never know the suffering that was in the world. At Siddhartha Gautama's birth, his father had received a prophecy that his son would be either a great teacher or a great conqueror, and the king was wise enough to know that the way to make him a conqueror was to ensure that he was without compassion. And so the doors of the palace remained shut to anything that might touch the prince's heart. The king made sure there were pleasures enough inside the palace that his son would never be tempted to venture outside. And perhaps he never would have been, had he not made friends with the cat, which alone of all things had turned its back on him and walked away.

The next day Siddhartha Gautama went out again to look for his friend the white cat, but instead he saw, hobbling down the street in front of him, a horrible apparition of a man, thin and frail and wrinkled, as if a fire had passed over him and consumed his flesh but left him still alive. Siddhartha Gautama caught up with the man — it was easy enough — and looked into his face. The man's mouth held only a few lonely teeth, and his eyes were the color of milk.

"Sir, tell me, who has done this to you? We will hunt them down and bring them to justice!"

The old face split into a grin and emitted a startling cackle. "Nobody has done this to me. It is old age. It happens to everyone. You must be from the palace, where nobody ever grows old."

That night Siddhartha Gautama lay upon his silken bed, deeply troubled. Sickness and age had been hidden from his eyes. He understood why now, since they made him so sad he almost could not bear it.

A third time Siddhartha Gautama set out looking for the Friend Beside The Pool, and this time, near the end of the day, as the western sky turned blood red and a thin sword of moon glittered in the east, he heard a terrible wailing from a hovel at the edge of the city. He went to the door and saw two women rocking back and forth over a shape that lay on the floor, wrapped in a threadbare blanket. The men stood in the corner, grim and silent. A child's face showed over the top of the blanket. He was very still and pale.

Siddhartha Gautama said, "Good people, tell me, why do you weep so over this child?"

One of the women looked up and said, "You must be the lucky prince, Siddhartha Gautama, who has never seen sor-

row. Well, see it now. This is death. This is my child, who was with me yesterday and who is gone today."

Siddhartha Gautama backed away from the door, his fist in his mouth to keep him from screaming. He felt as if a stick and a stone were beating against each other inside his chest. Tears streamed from his eyes, and he ran. He didn't know where he was running to, but still he ran until he was far from the palace and the city. He sank to the ground to think, but his thoughts were turbulent and confused. As he tried to master them, a man in an orange robe passed by. The man smiled but did not speak. His smile brought peace to Siddhartha Gautama's heart, though it would be difficult to say why. A spray of light shone before the man, as though his feet were diamonds, and he followed the light into the gloom of the encircling forest.

At last Siddhartha Gautama made his way back to the palace. It was night, and the thin moon rode very high and bright, and the stars twinkled about it as moths around a curving white flower. He sat down in his garden and listened to the sounds of the palace: the chatter of the servants, the clink of the supper plates being cleared away, the tuning of the musicians, the laughter of the women and children. One of the women was his wife, and one of the children was his son. He listened to their voices as if he might never hear them again.

As the prince sat and listened, he heard a noise coming out of the forest, a deep and awful sound, as of some great creature pushing the trees to either side as it walked. *Throom . . . throom*, went the noise, and the earth shook as the beast set first one foot upon it and then another. The prince did not dare look up, not until there was a sudden silence. Then he looked.

There, at the pool's edge, stood a tremendous tiger, snow white, with eyes the color of sapphires. A cloud of mist and incense rose from its gleaming fur, and when it breathed, the leaves shivered as at the coming of a storm. The garden was silent with dread of this great Presence, which could not be a mere animal, but must be a god.

Siddhartha Gautama raised his head and said, "You have changed, O Friend Beside The Pool."

"So have you, Compassionate One," said the tiger.

The creature walked toward him. The ground trembled, and in the depressions his paws had left, white roses sprang up and bloomed in an instant. The tiger who shook the earth came to the prince's side. With one hand Siddhartha Gautama lifted the white cat. With the other he began to scratch his ears. ■