

# THE MOUSE DEER

A character found in Indonesian tales

Mouse deer is a small animal found in Indonesia. It is much like the deer that live in the United States only smaller. Many tales have been told about the Indonesian mouse deer. In them he can be mischievous, clever, a trickster, or called upon for his fairness.

Once, long ago, while tramping through the forest mouse deer was thinking great thoughts about himself. He was sure he could outwit a tiger. This thought made him very happy.

Soon mouse deer came to the end of his forest, to the banks of a river. On the other side of the river was another forest that he wanted to investigate, but he couldn't swim.

He saw an alligator, which gave him an idea. Mouse deer asked the alligator if he had any friends. The alligator replied that he had many. Mouse deer said he would count the alligator's friends if they came over. When he saw all the alligators, mouse deer became a bit frightened but he didn't let it show. Instead he asked them to line up so he could count accurately. When they did mouse deer used the alligators to cross the river, counting each one as he stepped on its back.

When he got to the other side mouse deer laughed at the alligators for becoming his bridge. This made the first alligator so angry that he began to plot revenge. When mouse deer came back to the river for a drink of water, the alligator bit down on his leg. Mouse deer told the alligator that his leg was really a branch and that his actual leg was on his other side. When the alligator opened his mouth to bite where mouse deer pointed, mouse deer got away.

The alligator had been tricked twice now. This made him very, very angry so he hatched a new plan of revenge. He stood up tall and pretended to be a tree. When mouse deer saw him, he knew right away that it was alligator. He began to talk out loud saying that if what he saw was an alligator, it would stand up tall for a very long time because alligators are so strong. If, however, the thing he saw was an old tree it would fall over. Hearing this, the alligator fell over. Mouse deer laughed and laughed at having fooled the alligator a third time.

Mouse deer had so much fun fooling alligator he decided to try fooling the tigers when they came to his region with a threat.

One day the king of all tigers sent his friends to mouse deer's land. They brought with them one of their tiger king's whiskers and a message for the king of all beasts in mouse deer's area. All the emissaries saw him as a small, frail mouse deer, so the tigers

asked him to pass on the message that the tigers were coming to eat up all the meat in mouse deer's home land.

Since there was no king of all beasts in mouse deer's land he came up with a plan. Mouse deer asked his friend porcupine for one of her sharp quills. This he brought back to the tigers. He gave them the porcupine quill and told them it was from his king of all beasts. He also told them that if the tigers came back to his home they would have a fight on their hands.

The tigers thought the quill was a whisker from the king of all beasts. It frightened them to think about what kind of creature had such sharp whiskers. They took the quill and went back home. They presented the quill and the mouse deer's message to their king of all tigers who decided to leave mouse deer's homeland alone.

Mouse deer was, at times called upon to resolve a dispute. One day crocodile became trapped under a fallen tree. He was stuck all day long. Eventually water buffalo came along. Crocodile begged for help, which buffalo gave.

Instead of thanking the water buffalo for his assistance, crocodile began to snap at him. He was hungry and water buffalo looked like a tasty meal to crocodile. Buffalo couldn't believe the nerve of crocodile, so he called mouse deer.

When mouse deer arrived, water buffalo told him how crocodile

was stuck, how water buffalo saved him, and how now crocodile wants to eat water buffalo. Mouse deer thought about the situation. He then asked the two rivals to show him where crocodile was trapped. The two did as they were asked. Mouse deer asked the two to show him how the tree had trapped crocodile. So, crocodile went back under the tree. As soon as he did this, Mouse deer and water buffalo left. Being trapped again taught crocodile the importance of thanking those who help you. And so it was that mouse deer saved the day for water buffalo.

Adapted by Kathleen Simonetta. Inspired by the following stories:

“The Clever Mouse Deer” found in The Lion Storyteller Book of Animal Tales by Bob Hartman. Illustrations by Susie Poole. Lion Children’s Books, c2002, pp. 44-45.

“Why There are no Tigers in Bornio” found in Best Loved Folktales of the World: Selected with an introduction by Joanna Cole. Illustrated by Jill Karla Schwartz. NY: Anchor Books, c1982, pp. 602-605.

“Mischievous Mouse Deer, Kanchil” found in Indonesian Fables of Feats and Fortunes told and edited by Kuniko Sigura. Illustrated by Koji Honda. Translated by Matthew Galgani. Berkley, CA: Heian, c2001, pp. 3-13.

“The Mousedeer Becomes a Judge” found in Asian Children’s Favorite Stories retold by David Konger, Kay Lyons, Liana Romulo, Joan Suyenaga and Marian Davies Toth. Illustrated by Patrick Yee. Edited by Liana Romulo. Tokyo: Turtle Publishing, c2006, pp. 58-63.

