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THE HELPFULNESS OF HIPPO

There was a lot of excited chatter under the buyu tree at sundown next evening. At first Goha and Gogo had arrived wheeling Gulu, whose leg was in plaster, in the hospital wheelbarrow. More slowly behind came Elizabeti and Yuditi, between them a small girl both of whose eyes were bandaged.

Yuditi said, 'Bwana Daudi will come soon, Liso. He tells wonderful stories.'

'Eheh,' said Elizabeti, 'and we have good news for him. Have not many people listened to our words and looked at the places where we were vaccinated, and are they not coming tomorrow to the hospital?'

'Many have already come,' said Tali and Kali, the twins. 'That is why Bwana Daudi has not yet appeared.'

'Here he comes now,' said Gogo.



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Daudi smiled at them. 'Yoh!' he said, 'I have been busy springing the trap of this disease, smallpox. Truly vaccination is an excellent way of doing this. But look in here.' He held out a cardboard box.

'What is it?' whispered Liso.

Goha's voice answered, 'Koh! A loop of strong wire. A snare for animals?'

'Eheh,' said Daudi. 'They are evil things. If ever you come across one remove it with care, and remember, the great expert in setting traps is ...'

'Shaitan, the devil!' muttered Gogo.

'Hongo!' Gulu looked at his plaster-covered leg. 'I should hate to be caught in one of those.'

Daudi nodded. 'All traps take away your freedom and bring no joy. Those of small wisdom walk into them with their eyes wide open, but everybody at some time falls into one certain trap – the deadliest of the whole lot.'

'You speak of the sin trap, Bwana Daudi?'

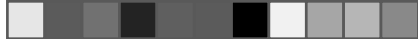
'I do indeed. And how do you get into it?'

'By doing things that are wrong and not doing things that you know to be right,' answered Goha.

'And can you get out by yourself?'

'No,' came the chorus of voices.

Daudi leaned back against the trunk of the great tree and said:



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In the thicker parts of the jungle Mwoko, the hunter's son threw down a great load of dry grass beside a deep dark hole that gaped in the path. 'A trap of value this,' said Hunter, as he skilfully spread the grass over a frame of light sticks. 'The sides slope like the neck of a great gourd – those that fall in won't get out. Tomorrow at the heat of noon when no feet move through the jungle but yours and mine, Mwoko, we shall return and find meat for our cooking-pot or skins to sell in the marketplace. Truly there is profit in this great trap.'

Even as they were talking, Dic-Dic, the antelope, came trotting along the river bank. Boohoo, the hippo, snoozed blissfully in his favourite water-lily pond. Dic-Dic stood looking at the large round nostrils, which were just above water level.

A sudden mischievous idea raced through his mind. He ran off to the jungle and found a tree covered with little yellow ball-like flowers. He broke a piece off and tip-hooved back. As quietly as he could he came close to Boohoo holding the branch with the yellow flowers between his teeth. He shook his head gently and a cloud of pollen settled on Hippo's nose.

A ripple spread across the pond, then a bigger one. Boohoo's eyes opened. His nose twitched. 'Oh dear! I'b going to ... I'b going to ... sneeze!'

'I thought you would,' chuckled Dic-Dic.

Hippo sneezed in a way that shook all the nearby trees. He lurched out of the pond and stood looking hard at Dic-Dic.



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‘*Er* – that wasn’t funny. I’b going to – *um* – bite you!’

Dic-Dic bolted, leaping over bushes, bounding over anthills, chortling away to himself, ‘Fancy him trying to catch me!’

He looked back over his shoulder and saw Boohoo lumbering along in the distance.

Ahead was a large and interesting-looking shadow. With a bound Dic-Dic landed neatly in the middle of it. A cloud of leaves and dry grass hit him in the face and he went head over hooves deep down into the darkness.

When his breath came back he found there was mud all round him and all he could see, through a ragged hole above him, was a patch of blue sky.

He tried to climb, but the walls were too steep. He tried to jump, but the mud held him down. He struggled frantically, but it was no good. He was caught. His only hope was in the light above him, and suddenly that too disappeared.

As he looked with terrified eyes he saw two round things that moved slowly about. He crouched in a corner hardly daring to breathe, and his heart nearly stopped beating when from between the round things came an eerie, echoing sound.

‘*Er* – *um* – are you down there, Dic-Dic?’

Antelope’s voice was squeaky with relief. ‘Boohoo! I’m sorry ...’



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‘Never mind, Dic-Dic. I just wanted to teach you a lesson. But I never thought you would fall into this trap. *Er* – wait a minute!’

For a moment the light came back and Dic-Dic heard, ‘Oh, Rhino, Antelope’s fallen into the trap down there.’

‘Stupid little beast,’ ground out Rhino. ‘Ought to have more sense. Ought to look where he’s going. Tell him to watch his step in future, and to get out of there fast. I’ve seen Hunter’s footprints all over the jungle today. When he comes back that will be the end of anybody in that trap.’

‘*Oh – er* – no, I mean yes,’ agreed Boohoo. ‘Dic-Dic, Rhino says you’re to watch your step in future. But don’t worry. I’ll work out some rules to help you not to fall into traps. *Er* – point ... one ...’

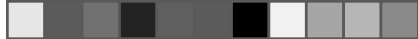
‘But I’m IN this trap!’ cried Dic-Dic. ‘It’s awful down here. There are things that ...’

‘Probably snakes,’ said Boohoo. ‘The worst sort live in the dark. *Er* – firstly, you must look out for places that are just covered over with leaves. Now, point two. Never walk on these. They are ... what’s the word? Ah, in-sub-stan-tial.’

Dic-Dic whispered, ‘Will the hunter come soon?’

‘Prob-ably. *Er* – what did you say, Rhino? *Oh – er* – that’s a worrying thought. He says at midday, Dic-Dic. It just shows how careful you need to be with traps. Point three ...’

‘Boohoo, I want to get out. I want to get out NOW, before the hunter ...’



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A cheerful voice interrupted. 'What's going on here, Boohoo? What are you counting your toes for?'

'*Er* – that's one, two, three. Yes, I know, but Dic-Dic's in the trap. I'm helping him.'

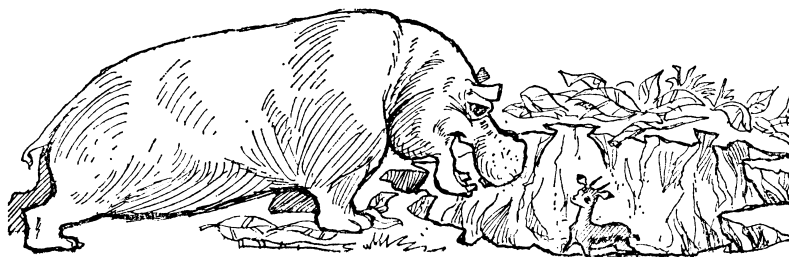
'Helping him? How?'

'Well, you see, I – *er* – I've told him how dangerous it is to fall into traps. I'm making some rules ... '

'That won't help him to get out! Dic-Dic, are you down there? It's Waddle, the duckling, here!'

There was a flutter of feathers and a small duck perched on the very edge of the trap and peered in. 'It's dark down there,' he quacked. 'More the place for snakes than worms. Pity you hadn't wings like mine. You could flap them, and *whoosh!* You'd be out.'

'But,' came Dic-Dic's small frightened voice, 'I haven't any wings, and I can't grow any!'



'Keep calm, Dic-Dic,' boomed Boohoo's voice. 'Thinking is very important. Say to yourself very con-vin-cing-ly, "There are no such things as traps".'

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Antelope shivered and wondered what Boohoo meant.

Monkey scuttled over to the top of the trap and looked down. 'Cheer up, Dic-Dic, keep your wits about you, and you'll get out by yourself!'

He sounded so cheerful and confident that Dic-Dic found his spirits rising.

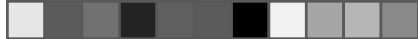
'Look around for something to stand on, then dig yourself steps with your paws, and climb out. It's simple!'

But as Dic-Dic nosed around in the gloom he found nothing. He tried to dig with his hooves, but it was no good. As his hopes faded he thought, 'It must be easier to dig with paws than with these things that I have at the end of my feet.'

The more he struggled, the more his spirits sank. There was no way out.

But Monkey had had another idea. He shot up a tree, broke off a stick, and was back in a flash.





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‘Dic-Dic,’ he called, ‘leave it to Monkey, and you’ll be out in a jiffy.’

He poked the stick down into the darkness. Antelope stretched up his neck and was just able to grip it with his teeth. Toto’s paws clutched the other end, but there was not room enough for him to hold it firmly.

Hyena, who, with Vulture, had been watching everything that happened from the shadows, laughed nastily. ‘Monkey wisdom’s a bit short, eh?’

Vulture made strange noises in his long scrawny neck, and started to sharpen his beak.

Boohoo brought his nose close to the hole in the leaves. ‘Dic-Dic, I’ve thought out three, that is to say, four, ways of not – *um* – falling into traps. Now you know about them you’ll find them very valu-able, I’m sure.’

Vulture looked at Hyena, and they both smirked, but Dic-Dic called with a small voice, ‘Boohoo, is it nearly midday?’

Monkey was busily climbing the tree again chortling, ‘Bigger, better sticks; that’s the answer. Now we’ll have him out before you can say COCONUT!’ He came rushing to the side of the trap again with a long stick which was so thick that he could barely grip it between his paws. ‘This one’s plenty long enough,’ he told Boohoo, ‘and it won’t break either.’

‘*Er* – very sub-stan-tial,’ murmured Hippo.

But Monkey was peering down into the darkness. ‘Dic-Dic, here’s another stick. A long strong one. Grab hold, and we’ll have you out in no time.’

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But Dic-Dic found it was too thick to grip properly with his teeth.

‘Wind your tail around it!’ yelled Monkey, ‘and whatever you do, hang on!’

Boohoo ambled over to where Monkey was working busily. He put his chin under the end of the stick and slowly placed his front foot on top of it. ‘Um – sub-stan-tial stick this.’

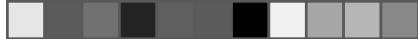
‘Are you all right?’ shouted Monkey excitedly.

Dic-Dic could say nothing. His mouth was tightly closed around the stick.

‘I have my foot in the right pos-i-tion now,’ came Boohoo’s voice. ‘This will fix it.’ He pushed hard. Down shot his end of the stick. Up rocketed the other.



Dic-Dic’s neck jerked upwards. His head hit the top of the trap with a bang, and his teeth lost their grip. He fell back heavily – *Splash!* – into the mud.



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‘What happened?’ shouted Monkey. ‘Are you all right? Why didn’t you hang on?’

Dic-Dic was dizzy with pain and disappointment.

‘*Er* – I did my bit, you know,’ said Hippo proudly. ‘full of ass-i-s – *er* – ass-ist – *er* – that is, you’ll always find me very helpful.’

Bruised and battered, Dic-Dic struggled to his feet. The fear in his heart grew. He’d never get out of this dreadful trap. He could see the sun now. It would soon be midday.

Another vulture arrived. Hyena licked his lips. Boohoo shook his head sadly. ‘A pity. A very great pity. I’m sure we could have – *er* – worked out something if there had only been the opp – oppor – *um* – if we’d had much more time.’

Monkey sat scratching his head and making important agitated noises.

A great shadow moved silently through the trees and stopped near the edge of the trap. The vultures rose heavily into the air, and Hyena slunk away into the shadows. Dic-Dic’s mouth went dry as the ground above him trembled with the movement of many feet.

He shuddered. Had the hunter arrived?

He shrank back in alarm as a long snake-like thing came over the edge of the trap.

‘Dic-Dic, come over into the light!’ It was a deep, friendly voice, and a wave of relief came into small Antelope’s mind.

‘Is it really you, Tembo?’



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‘Of course it is. Come over here where I can help you. This is your only way out.’

‘But I’ve tried and tried, and I’m still trapped. And the others have tried too.’

There came the urgent whirr of Waddle’s wings.

‘Hurry!’ he quacked, ‘the hunter’s very close now!’

‘Trust me,’ said Elephant quietly, ‘leave it to me. Put your feet as high as you can.’

‘But I’m not much good at holding on to things,’ panted small Antelope.

‘You don’t have to. I’ll hold you.’

Dic-Dic struggled on to his hind legs. He could see Elephant’s trunk well within reach now, but inside his mind were all sorts of questions and doubts. ‘Trust yourself to me,’ came the comforting voice.

Dic-Dic put his legs on the curve of the trunk and felt it strong, holding him gently, but very firmly. All at once he felt a change come inside him. Tembo had said he could do it, and the strength of his grip gave the same message.

‘Don’t look back. Don’t look down. Keep your eyes on me,’ said Elephant.

Dic-Dic found himself being lifted out of the darkness. He felt his feet touch solid ground. He looked around. He was safe. His eyes said ‘Thank you’ far louder than his tongue ever could.

Elephant’s words came clearly, ‘Come with me. Let’s go out of here together. And the closer you keep the safer you’ll be.’



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The small girl with the bandaged eyes put her hands out to Daudi, 'Great One, I'm in the sin trap. Oh, I know I am. Who is able to help me?'

'God's Son, Jesus, is the only One who can help,' said Daudi gently. 'If you ask him to forgive you, He will lift you out of the sin trap and show you, through the Bible, the way to live.'

There was a catch in the small girl's voice. 'If the medicines don't work on my eyes, I won't ever be able to read the Bible. I will never know.'

Daudi looked up. Elizabeti nodded. 'We will help you and read it to you.'

'Ngheeh!' said Daudi, 'that's the best way to take the deadliness out of traps, and it is very different from the helpfulness of hippos.'

* * *

What's Inside the Fable?

Special Message: Jesus will lift you out of your sin trap, if you ask him to.

Read *Psalms 40:1-4*

Read *1 John 1:8-10*