

How the Agouti Lost its Tail

Long, long ago, the island of Trinidad was a place of only mountains, green plains and beautiful, clear rivers. There were no people. No houses or tall buildings hid the sky. There were no bicycles and motor cars and certainly no trains and aeroplanes. There were only animals. The lappe, the quenk, the tigercat, and many others lived quite happily together under the care of the Father of the Forest, "Papa Bois". Of course, they had their little quarrels and fights, but they were more like brothers and sisters squabbling than like enemies. Most of the animals who don't like each other at all today were the very best of friends then, and chief among these were the dog and the agouti.

Mr Dog was very much as he is today but Mr Agouti had a beautiful, long tail, of which he was very proud.

These two were very close friends and enjoyed each other's company very much. So friendly were they that when Mr Agouti found that his first home was getting too old and small for him, he decided to find himself a bigger hole and more land to plant, and invited Mr Dog to live near to him, and share the same garden. Mr Dog was delighted. He accepted the invitation, and the two set off to look for a nice piece of land on which to settle.

After much searching, they found a nice bit of land away up in San Juan near the river. Mr Agouti was

delighted! The land was good for planting, and there was a hollow tree which had fallen and proved to be just what he needed as a home. Mr Dog was very glad that they were so near to a river, because if there was one thing he liked, it was an early morning dip in cool, clear water. He built himself a house of sticks with a roof of coconut fronds and settled down to enjoy life.

The pair did very well together. They planted ochroes, cassava, green figs, and even pigeon peas. They had a lot of food to eat, and mischievous animals were afraid to come around stealing what they planted because Mr Dog was a very good watchman. When anyone he didn't know came near the garden, he would bark loudly and frighten them off.

Everything went quite smoothly for a long, long time. Then one day all the horned animals of the island decided to have a picnic. They planned to pay a visit to the Gasparee Caves on Gasparee Island. Of course, they would have to go by boat, and everyone was excited at the thought of the trip by sea.

News of the picnic spread like a forest fire through the island, and animals all around started preparing for the great day. When Mr Dog and Mr Agouti first heard about the picnic they didn't really believe that only animals with horns would be invited. After all, they were very friendly with the cows, goats, deer and others that lived near them and they refused to believe that their friends would plan such a wonderful picnic and not invite them.

However, according to the old saying, "Birds of a feather flock together", and not one goat, sheep, bull

or otherwise, even thought of sending an invitation to Mr Dog and Mr Agouti.

Plans for the picnic went forward and gradually our two friends realised that they had been left out. Mr Agouti thought of all the pelau and mauby that would be served, and sighed deeply. Mr Dog thought of the lovely clear water around Gasparee Island, and of the stinging rum punch to follow a dip, and he, too, sighed.

Days went by. The two friends in their home in San Juan became more and more anxious to go to the picnic. Mr Dog could not get it out of his mind. He dreamed about the sea and the rum punch, a plate heaped high with pelau, a large piece of ripe zaboca on the side and a large, yellow pepper.

It was too much for him to bear. He became irritable and snappish, and even had one or two quarrels with Mr Agouti.

Mr Agouti on the other hand, wanted to go to the picnic very much, but had more or less made up his mind that he couldn't. So, while he continued to sigh whenever he thought about it, he didn't become as fretful as his friend.

Mr Dog, however, wasn't just fretting. He was also thinking, and one day he got what he was sure was a marvellous idea. He would find himself a pair of horns. Surely that would be easy to do! There were old horns all about from bulls that had died long ago. "Oh! What a wonderful, masterful idea!" Dog thought to himself. "I always knew I was a clever fellow. With my size, I am sure that once I get my horns on, no one will notice the

difference between me and any other.”

Horns were indeed easy to find, and so was laglee, the sticky sap from trees, which he gathered to stick the horns to his head. The only fly in the ointment, however, was Mr Agouti.

As long as Agouti was sure that neither Dog nor himself could go to the picnic, he was quite happy. But when Mr Dog arrived home with a pair of horns and some laglee, his attitude changed. Agouti knew very well that it was no use sticking a pair of horns to his head, because there was no horned animal as small as he. Only Dog was big enough to get away with that trick.

However, Agouti didn't let his friend know how he felt. He simply smiled and agreed that it was a very good idea and one likely to succeed. He was right. On the night before the picnic, Mr Dog stuck the horns to his head and no matter how Mr Agouti pulled and tugged, pushed and twisted, he couldn't move them. Mr Dog was sure that everything was going to be just fine.

Next morning Mr Agouti and his now horned friend, Mr Dog, left San Juan very early, because it was a long way to the jetty in Port of Spain. Moreover, they didn't want anyone to see them.

When they got to the jetty, Mr Dog waited until there were quite a few animals around before he came out of hiding. The horned animals were so busy checking their picnic baskets at the last minute that they didn't have time to notice Mr Dog, and he managed to get aboard the boat without anyone asking questions.

Captain Goat pulled up his anchor, and two bulls began to row away from the jetty.



Mr Agouti could contain himself no longer. All of his anger and envy burst from him, and without really realising what he was doing, he shouted at the top of his voice, "Captain Goat! Captain Goat! There's a traitor aboard. Examine the horns! Examine the horns!"

At first Captain Goat didn't understand what Mr Agouti was shouting and was just about to answer him rudely when Mr Agouti said, "Dog has no horns! Examine the horns!"

Captain Billy Goat had always been a fast thinker. He acted quickly. In no time at all he stopped the boat and let his anchor down again. He called the animals together. He said: "Mr Agouti says that there is a traitor aboard. I must check the horns. Come up all of you and be tested." Of course, as soon as Mr Dog came out of the crowd to have his horns tested, everyone could see that he really shouldn't have horns at all. Captain Billy Goat was angry. He butted Mr Dog so hard that his head nearly flew off his shoulders. But Mr Dog's head was his own, after all, and it was the false horns that flew instead. Away over the side of the boat they went and plunked into the sea.

The animals then lifted Mr Dog and threw him, coat, shoes, dried laglee and all, into the sea.

Mr Dog came up to the surface of the water and swam off to land.

Mr Agouti didn't wait for him to reach ashore. He took off, running as fast as his legs would take him. He knew that the days of his friendship with Dog were at an end. He had a long way to go. Running at top speed

through Laventille he could hear Mr Dog panting behind him. His heart was beating thump! thump! His short legs moved faster, faster, until it was almost impossible to see him. He was like a brown streak of lightning moving through the countryside. But no matter how fast he went, he could still hear Mr Dog panting close behind him.

Mr Dog was trying his best. Agouti had a head start but Mr Dog had longer legs. He was determined to catch his unfaithful friend. At last Mr Agouti could see the river. He flashed up to his hole at great speed, and darted in. Mr Dog, with jaws wide open, driven by his anger, put on a fresh burst of speed, and snapped at Mr Agouti just as his body disappeared into the hole. He caught hold of Mr Agouti's tail and bit it clean off! Agouti yelled with pain, but remained in his hiding place.

Mr Dog couldn't follow Agouti into the hole because he was too big. He remained outside barking and scratching, but of course, Mr Agouti didn't come out. And this is why today Mr Agouti has no tail, and Mr Dog always scratches and barks outside an agouti's hole whenever he finds one.

Wire bend!

Story end.

- 1 We are told that long, long ago, there were no people living in Trinidad. Find one word to describe Trinidad – one word which means “nobody lived in it”.

- 2 Prove that Mr Dog and Mr Agouti were very good friends before their quarrel.
- 3 Both Mr Dog and Mr Agouti were delighted with the bit of land they found for their new home. Give the reasons why each was so delighted.
- 4 Why were Mr Dog and Mr Agouti not invited to the picnic? They both felt very badly about this, but for different reasons. Give these reasons.
- 5 Why was Mr Agouti not quite as fretful as Mr Dog about not being invited to the picnic?
- 6 Find a sentence in the story which tells you that Mr Agouti was travelling at very great speed when he was trying to get away from Mr Dog.
- 7 When Captain Billy Goat butted Mr Dog on the boat we are told that Mr Dog's false horns flew off and *plunked* into the sea. The writer used the word "plunked" to give us some idea of the sound the horns made when they hit the water. Can you make up two or three phrases or short sentences using some soundwords of your own?