

The Lion Who Always Said I'm Sorry
A Story for All Ages by Aaron McEmrys

Once upon a time there was a lion who always said, "I'm sorry." He was friendly, and always kept his claws, paws, teeth and coat immaculately clean and tidy. When he walked by, his glossy coat shimmering in the bright sun all of his mother's friends would say, "what a very well-groomed young lion he is." But above all, the lion was polite. His mother and father had taught him from his earliest cub-hood that, "good manners make the lion" and that "courtesy is the backbone of civilization." It would be very hard indeed to find another lion anywhere who was as polite as this one.

The lion spent a lot of time hunting, as lions are wont to do, for he was a growing boy and was always very hungry no matter how many herbivores he devoured. But no matter how much his tummy rumbled or how impatiently he wanted to pop another little critter in his mouth he never forgot his manners:

"Excuse me," he would say, as he held some scared little creature in his powerful paws, "terribly sorry, but I'm afraid I am going to eat you now...I'm most terribly sorry." And even after he had popped his unfortunate lunch into his terrible jaws he would keep apologizing, "terribly sorry, old chap...so sorry....you're very tasty, did you know that? Ohhhh so sorry, please accept my humble apology..." before swallowing that last morsel and letting out a satisfied burp, which he would cover politely with his paw as he had been taught to do.

This drove the other animals of the savannah crazy! It was bad enough that he had to go around eating them all the time, but the constant apologizing was simply too much! Finally, after much discussion, they decided to teach the lion a lesson.

The animals went to a special pool in the deepest part of the jungle and in an old and mighty tree there lived a magic bird named "Hoopoe." Hoopoe listened carefully to the animal's complaints, and after much reflection she agreed to help them.

The bird flew like the wind to the lion's favorite hunting grounds and waited for him on the branch of a small tree. She was a tiny bird on this day, barely a mouthful for a lion, but her feathers were so bright and beautiful and eyes shone like jewels – she knew the lion would never be able to resist such a scrumptious appetizer.

In due time the lion crept up behind Hoopoe, slowly rising up behind her with his sharp claws and drooling fangs. She knew he was there, of course, and he was falling right into her trap. With lightning speed the lion caught Hoopoe in his claws and said, "Oh beautiful bird, jewel of the savannah, I am very sorry and I must apologize most profusely in advance for I am about to eat you. Terribly sorry."

"Oh lion, she said, "You are a lion and lions must hunt. All the animals of the forest understand that, but I can see in your eyes that there is no sorrow in you and your apologies are hollow. Beware, there is nothing in this world so sure to leave you sad and alone as your false tears."

The lion considered the little bird for a moment, smiled, and said, “Thanks for the advice little jewel, but you are not my teacher, only my snack!” And with that he popped her into his mouth and swallowed her in one gulp. He was very satisfied with himself.

Remember, Hoopoe was just a tiny thing, just enough to make the lion feel even hungrier. So he got into his best hunting crouch and stalked off across the meadows in search of an entrée.

And that’s when things started to go terribly wrong.

Every time he got anywhere near the water holes where the succulent water buffalo were drinking, every time he crept close to a tasty family of Thompson’s gazelles or a nice swamp-marinated hippo the little bird in his belly would begin to sing; crystal loud and clear Hoopoe’s song would rise up from deep inside him, force its way through his clenched fangs and out into the world, “Danger,” she sang, “Danger, here comes an untrustworthy lion!” And the animals, duly warned, would scatter before the lion could get close enough to pounce!

After a few days of this the lion was starving. Every time he tried to get close to his prey the magic Hoopoe would start singing and the animals would escape. For the first time in his life he was afraid, afraid he would starve to death. Terrified, hungry and desperate, the lion roamed across the savannah begging for help, the Hoopoe’s song still filling the air. But the other animals did not trust him and would not answer his call.

Finally the lion just lay down next to the big watering hole to die. He finally realized that the fear he felt, the stark terror and grief at the

thought that he would never see his parents again, never walk proud under the bright blue sky again – he was so afraid and in a flash of insight he realized that the fear and loneliness he felt was probably exactly what all the little animals felt just before he ate them. He felt so sorry and ashamed at the way he had been so coldly proper and polite – “oh so terribly sorry, old chap, but I have to eat you now.” What a fool he had been!

And so with his dying breath he begged the other animals to forgive him. “I have been so wrong my friends, thinking only of myself. I am a lion and so I must eat you to live – but I should have respected you enough to do so with honor. Instead I mocked you with my false apologies and made you hate me. I am so sorry. Please forgive me before I die.”

With that a few tears of genuine sorrow began to run down the lion’s face. He was truly sorry and suddenly he felt something moving in his tummy and then, with the most impolite burp – the magic bird flew out of his mouth and onto a nearby tree.

The animals forgave the lion, not for eating them which they knew is what lion’s do – but for his irritating, “I’m so terribly sorry.” He was so weak that he could barely move, so the animals brought him delicious bowls of hummus and falafel and lots of other vegetarian delights that herbivores everywhere seem to love.

The lion was surprised at how tasty everything was, and before long he had lost interest in hunting altogether. The gazelles and zebras and

meercats taught him all their secret recipe's and soon the lion had become a very accomplished vegetarian chef. Somewhere along the line he let his mane grow into a wild tangle of dreadlocks, started wearing Birkenstock sandals and moved to Portland, Oregon to open a very hip vegan café, called Wildwood.

And as far as I know he is still there to this day. And whenever he says he's sorry about something there is no doubt that he is telling the truth.