

FUR AND FEATHERS

(a Maasai legend, East Africa)

The Pride and Joy of Mama Ostrich were her two baby chicks, hatched from her very own eggs.

One day, when Mama Ostrich returned home from gathering food for her two dear chicks, she looked and looked for them but could not find them anywhere. Imagine her alarm when she discovered lion tracks around her two-footed chicks' tracks! Fearful but determined to find her babies, she followed the lion tracks.

The tracks led into the woods and finally ended at the den of Mama Lion. In the opening through the cave there lay her own dear chicks in the arms of Mama Lion.

"What are you doing with my chicks?" cried Mama Ostrich. "Return them to me at once!"

"What do you mean your chicks?" Mama Lion growled. "These are my cubs, that's plain to see."

"It's not at all plain to see," said Mama Ostrich. "Those are chicks -- ostrich chicks -- and I'm an ostrich and you're a lion!"

"Is that so?" snarled Mama Lion. "Then you won't have any trouble finding any other animal who agrees with you. I dare you: Find any animal at all that will look me in the eye and tell me that these are not my cubs. Do that, then I'll release them to you." Mama Lion got up, stretched, and roared a ferocious roar.

Mama Ostrich quickly ran off to each and every animal to tell them that she was assembling a meeting to discuss a terrible injustice. When she arrived at the home of the Mongoose and told him her sad story, the mongoose thought and thought. Then he had an idea. He told her to dig a hole under an ant-hill and to make a second exit out of the ant-hill. This she did, and then she told all the animals -- including Mama Lion -- to gather there at the ant-hill.

When all had gathered, Mama Ostrich explained to the group how Mama Lion had captured her dear, sweet chicks. The zebras and antelopes and all the other animals glanced at the chicks held closely by Mama Lion, and nodded with understanding. But when Mama Ostrich said that she needed just one animal to come forward and look Mama Lion in the eye and tell her that she was not the mother of these chicks, each and every animal in the meeting looked down at the ground. One by one when each animal was asked, each animal whispered that the little ones definitely belonged to Mama Lion, and there was no question about that.

When it came to Mongoose's turn, he cried out, "Have you ever seen a mama with fur with babies that had feathers? Think of what you are saying. Mama Lion has fur! The chicks have feathers! They belong to the ostrich!" And having said that, Mongoose jumped down the hole under the ant-hill, and escaped out the other end. At once, Mama Lion jumped after him, and when she did so the two ostrich chicks were freed. Of course they scrambled immediately right into their mother's

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open wings.

Not knowing about the second exit, Mama Lion paced and paced by the ant-hill hole, waiting for Mongoose to come out of the hole by which he had entered. The other animals at the meeting cautiously departed one by one. Mama Lion was left waiting at the entrance to the ant-hill for a very, very long time.