

THE DOPEY LION – A MODERN FABLE

by
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The Uмба region is a beautiful hidden corner of Tanzania. Bounded by forests on the east and north and a placid stream on the west, it is almost isolated from the rest of the Serengeti. It is a peaceful place, except at the end of the rainy season, when its expanse of grassland witnesses the raucous passage of hordes of wildebeest, gazelles, impalas and zebras that come from the south in search of greener pastures.

At the time of this story, a pride of lions under the leadership of an older male named Bemba with a carefully groomed tawny mane had established itself as rulers of all that lived, transited and often died in the territory.

Bemba had come to power by out-roaring competing males and females over the course of several challenges. The pride now consisted of Bemba, several sycophantic males and a good number of females (including his attractive mate), plus youth and cubs.

Bemba slept through much of the day but was active in the early morning and had most of his activities (which consisted of abusing everyone in his domain) at that time. He left hunting to the females and concentrated instead on preening, walking about and defecating. He did not get enough exercise and eating was his favorite pastime, so he had become fat over the years and now weighed over 500 pounds.

His governing style consisted of making grandiose, self-praising pronouncements and issuing orders suggested to him by his underlings. After a while, nobody paid attention to the pronouncements, which often made no sense. His orders, however, needed to be obeyed if one wanted to stay in his good graces.

From the start, Bemba's orders had sowed discontent among his subjects. A case in point: shortly into his rule, an outwardly healthy male had dropped dead without visible wounds. Later, as the vultures cleaned the carcass, it was discovered that the lion's intestines were rife with tapeworms, and other remains in the animal identified antelope meat as being part of his diet. Some of Bemba's advisors concluded that antelopes were carriers of disease.

Bemba immediately ordered a ban on the entry of antelopes into his domain and the expulsion of those present. These orders were difficult to administer, since antelopes came in great numbers during the migration at the end of the rainy season, and were largely circumvented by those already in his territory, who took flight when those charged with enforcing the expulsion approached.

Nonetheless, the orders caused resentment because they often deprived lions and other predators of a prized food source.

One evening, Bemba was breakfasting on a wildebeest that one of his wives had just slain. The corpse was so fresh that a small bird was still pecking at the hide, eating ticks. Bemba was familiar with birds like that one, for they often traveled alongside the ungulates that migrated through the savanna each year. Like many of its kind, this specimen was small and had a short, thick, red bill. His large eyes were red and unblinking and were surrounded by bright-yellow circles. The head, neck, wings and tail were brown-gray; the undersides were pale yellow. It stared curiously at Bemba but did not appear scared of the predator.

"Get away from my meal," growled Bemba.

“Why?” replied Oxlicker, for that was what many called the bird. “I’m doing you a favor. I eat ticks, fleas and insects infesting wounds of animals like this fellow. You should be grateful that I get rid of all that vermin for your convenience.”

“Ticks never bothered me. But YOU are starting to annoy me. Get out of here unless you want to be part of my breakfast.”

“Now, wait...” Oxlicker jumped off the carcass and flew around the lion, keeping a safe distance from his jaws. “I’ve traveled all over the world and have a lot of information that could be valuable to an eminent animal like you.”

“What information could I need from you? I am Bemba, king of the savanna. I am feared and respected by all.”

“Yes, but I bet you don’t know that you have many enemies, like the antelopes you tried to ban. They, and others who don’t like you, are amassing at your borders bent on ousting you.”

Bemba took the threat seriously. “Really? I must alert the pride so we can defend ourselves.”

“Just one second. The threat is serious but not imminent. We’re in the middle of the dry season. The attack will take place during the great migration moons from now, at the end of the rainy season. We have time to prepare.”

Bemba, being dim-witted, had no idea of how to prepare against the impending attack. “What do we have to do?”

Oxlicker appeared to ponder for just one second. Then he declared, “Hire me as your advisor and promise to let me feed on this pride’s catch for as long as I want and I will tell you what to do.”

“As long as you eat only ticks and fleas, that arrangement is fine with me.”

“Deal.”

So Oxlicker became one of Bemba’s most trusted advisors. He promptly recommended measures to improve internal security and “make sure there were no disloyal subjects lurking behind the king’s back that could assist the enemy.” In this category were included the herds of baboons that roamed throughout the savanna.

Bemba disdained baboons, because with their hairless red bottoms, they did not look like the other animals. Also, they lived by themselves and had strange habits. They were extremely difficult to catch, for when chased, they climbed up trees, out of reach.

Oxlicker hated them because they ate insects that could have been part of his diet. In other words, they were a disfavored minority group, prime targets for discrimination.

Bemba ordered all herds of baboons out of his territory and further ordered that they, like the antelopes, be denied entry into the portion of the savanna he controlled. These orders were carried out with limited success by packs of wild dogs that roamed the savanna all through the year.

Baboons often held their ground and fought the wild dogs or escaped them by climbing into acacias or baobabs. For that reason, Bemba’s eradication efforts were often bloody and lingered on for many months without getting rid of the pestilent animals.

In addition to fighting the perceived internal disloyalty, Oxlicker recommended to Bemba that he built a high palisade along the southern boundary of his domain. Such a palisade, he argued, would stop incursions and delay any attacks.

Bemba, who was given to boasting, embraced the idea and vowed publicly to build a beautiful palisade, the tallest and greatest palisade the world had ever seen.

This was, however, not such an easy task. He would have to engage the elephants that lived in his kingdom and maybe invite others from abroad to fell trees, carry them to the border area and

stack them on top of each other to a sufficient height. It would take forever to get the job done, and since each elephant consumed many pounds of vegetable matter daily, all other animals in Bemba's domain would need to be mobilized to gather feed for the workers.

Nonetheless, Bemba was too dim to understand the difficulties of the project and too arrogant to go back on his promise to complete it.

"We will build the palisade, make no mistake about it. Sooner or later, we will get it done," he would repeat to everyone, over and over, despite the indifference or resentment of his subjects.

But he did not get to build it. That, and several other costly plans proposed by Oxlicker, failed to materialize after being bombastically announced and caused Bemba's rule to become more tenuous and his kingdom more divided.

And the threatened invasion – which had been only an invention of Oxlicker – actually did come about, because prides in other parts of the savanna took notice of the decline and stormed across the border, leading to a ferocious fight between Bemba's forces and the interlopers.

Oxlicker flew away early in the conflict and was never seen again.

It was only through great pains, suffering and bloodshed that dominion over Umba was maintained by Bemba's pride. But not with him at the helm: a younger and more sensible lion challenged Bemba and deposed him with relatively little effort. The older lion justified his demise to having become tired (as he was wont to say) of winning and deciding to rest on his laurels and bask in the veneration of his subjects.

But no veneration was ever granted; he was reviled as the worst ruler Umba ever knew, that is until, later, another egotistical beast took the throne. But that is a story for another day.