

How the Guinea Fowl Got Her Spots

retold and illustrated by Barbara Knutson

A long time ago, when everything had just been made, Nganga the Guinea Fowl had glossy black feathers all over. She had no white speckles as she does today – not a single spot.

Guinea Fowl was a little bird, but she had a big friend. And that was Cow.

They liked to go to the great green hills where Cow could eat grass and Nganga could scratch for seeds and crunch grasshoppers.

And they would both keep an eye out for Lion.

One day, Guinea Fowl was crossing the river to meet Cow on the most delicious hill they knew. The grass was so juicy and thick that, even from the river, Nganga could hear Cow hungrily tearing up one mouthful after another.

But...what was that Nganga saw slinking toward Cow?

Was it...?

Yes, it was LION!

Now you might think a guinea fowl is no match for a lion, but Nganga didn't think that. In fact, she didn't think at all.

She scratched and scrambled up the bank as fast as she could and whirled right between Cow and Lion, kicking and flapping in the dust.

“RAAUGH!” shouted Lion.

“My eyes! This sand! What was that?”

When the clods of dust thinned there was no sign of anyone—certainly not any dinner for Lion. He went home in a terrible temper, growling like his empty belly.

The next day, Guinea Fowl was at the grassy patch first. You can be sure she had her eyes wide open for Lion.

Soon she saw Cow cautiously crossing the river to join her—shlip, clop, shlop, But something yellow was twitching in the reed.

Wasn't that Lion's tail?

Up whirled Nganga, half tumbling, half flying with her stubby wings. Lion looked up, startled, from his hiding place. Frrr...a little black whirlwind was racing across the grass toward the river. “Whe-klo-klo-klo!” it called out to Cow.

“Guinea Fowl! That's where the duststorm came from yesterday,” growled Lion between his sharp teeth. But the next moment, the whirlwind hit the river.

“RAAUghmf!” Lion exploded with a roar that ended underwater.

“Ill teach that bird to chase away my dinner!” he spluttered. But by the time his roar was working properly again, Cow and Guinea Fowl were safely over the next hill at Cow's house.

“Nganga,” mooed Cow gratefully, “twice you have helped me escape from Lion. Now I will help you do the same.”

Turning around, she dipped her tasseled tail into a calabash of milk. Then she shook the tasselful of milk over Guinea Fowl's sleek black feathers—flick, flock, flick—spattering her with creamy white milk.

Guinea Fowl craned her head and admired the delicate speckles covering her back.

She spread her wings, and Cow sprinkled them with milk too—flick, flock, flick.

“Whe-klo-klo! That's beautiful, Cow!” chuckled Nganga. “Thank you, my friend!”

And she set off for home.

Whom should she meet where the path crossed the river but Lion, still shaking the water out of his ears and angrier than ever.

“Ho, Speckled Bird!” snorted Lion. “Have you seen Guinea Fowl on your path?”

“Oh yes,” clucked Nganga, hiding a smile. “I believe she went that way.”

She pointed with her spotted wing to the hills far down the river.

“If you go quickly and don't stop to rest, you may catch up with her in a few days.”

Lion leaped up at once, not bothering to thank the strange bird. A minute later, he thought about taking her along for a traveling snack, but when he looked back at the riverbank, he could see no trace of her.

“These lovely spots are just the thing for hiding in the shadows and grass!” laughed Nganga who was, in fact, right where Lion had left her.

And she turned back to Cow's house to thank her friend again.