

## When Buster Was a Cub

by George Ethelbert Walsh

In the North Woods where Buster was born, a wide river tinkles merrily over stones that are so white you'd mistake them for snowballs, if you were not careful, and begin pelting each other with them. The birches hanging over the water look like white sticks of peppermint candy, except in the spring of the year when they blossom out in green leaves, and then they make you think of fairyland where everything is painted the colors of the rainbow.

The rocks that slope up from the bank of the river are dented and broken as if some giant in the past had smashed them with his hammer, cracking some and punching deep holes in others. It was in one of these holes, or caves, that Buster was born.

He didn't mind the hard rocky floor of his bed a bit, nor did he mind the darkness, nor the cold winds that swept through the open doorway. He was so well protected by his thick, furry coat that he didn't need a soft bed on which to take his nap. A big stone made a nice pillow for his head, and he rather liked the hard floor for a bed when he curled up to go to sleep.

Buster was an only child. He didn't know what a brother or sister was like, and so he didn't miss either. He had his mother, who was good enough for him, and when he was old enough to crawl out on the rocks in front of his home he would spend hours and hours there playing with her in the bright sunshine.

Sometimes Mother Bear had to leave him while she went off in the woods to get something to eat. At such times she made Buster stay in the cave.

"You mustn't show yourself on the rock, Buster," she cautioned, "until you hear me call you. I won't be gone long."

Buster was a dutiful little cub, and he accepted his mother's commands without asking why or wherefore. Perhaps that was because he was too young to understand, or because his mother was very strict with her only child. When he was very young, so young that he could hardly see at all, his mother used to tell him what to do and then gently but firmly make him do it, using her big hairy paws to enforce obedience.

These early lessons were never forgotten, and Buster got in the habit of minding his mother just as naturally as a tree grows straight when trained upright to a stake. But Buster grew curious as he got older, and one day when his mother was going away he asked: "Why can't I play in front until you come back?"

"Because," replied Mother Bear, "Loup the Lynx might come along and eat you up."

"Who is Loup the Lynx?" asked Buster, turning very pale, for he had a wholesome dread of being eaten up.

"Never mind, dear. You stay inside until I come back."

That was a mighty argument of Mother Bear's to make her child obey. He was so afraid of Loup the Lynx that he never dared to poke his nose out of the cave when his mother was away. And sometimes the temptation to do it was very strong, for as he grew bigger and stronger the sunshine had a great fascination for him. Nothing in the world seemed pleasanter than to roll around on the rocks outside, blinking at the warm sun, and smelling the odors of the sweet flowers. It was springtime then, and the woods were full of the song of birds and the drone of busy insects. It made one wish to be outdoors all the time.

"You must be careful today, Buster," his mother said to him one morning, "and stay inside the cave. I heard Loup the Lynx hunting around here last night. I don't like him. He's a rough, brutal fellow, and nearly always up to some mischief. I hate to leave you a minute today. But I must."

Buster kept his promise, and remained inside all the morning, playing with his tail and the few leaves the wind blew in the cave. Toward noon, however, he got tired of this, and also very hungry. When a bear is hungry, he becomes very bold and will do things that would never occur to him at other times.

Buster sniffed in all the corners of the cave for a bite of something good to eat, but there was nothing more digestible than rocks and stones. Then he crept nearer the entrance, venturing a little closer every moment.

A streak of sunlight played on the rocks in front of him, and it so fascinated him that he began trying to catch it with his little paws. He had it, then lost it, and then sprang for it again. But the sunlight danced around, and never stayed caught.

In the midst of this game of tag with the sunlight, Buster heard a noise outside. It sounded like some animal scuffling heavily over the rocks, and the little fellow was so sure it was his mother that he ran out to greet her.

But what a surprise met him! Instead of Mother Bear there stood Loup the Lynx, crouching and sniffing, with his long tail swishing back and forth making a noise like a nutmeg grater.

Buster had never seen Loup the Lynx before, but nobody had to tell him now. He recognized him instantly. His first thought was to run back in the dark cave. Loup had a great dread of being caught in the cave by Mother Bear. If he had to fight with a full grown bear he preferred to be out in the open where he could spring in a tree if knocked over by a big paw. So he resorted to cunning to induce Buster to come out further.

"Don't be afraid, Buster," he said pleasantly. "I'm not going to hurt you. Your mother was delayed in the woods, and she sent me here to watch the mouth of the cave so no harm would come to you."

Buster was surprised at this information, and he stopped to look at Loup. He didn't like his face, but if his mother sent him it must be all right.

"I was watching you playing with that sun-beam," Loup continued, lying down with his two paws in front of him. "I used to do that when I was young, but I'm too old now. I can't jump around as I used to. Now let me see if you can catch the sun-beam." Buster was less afraid than ever, and he wanted to show Loup how spry he was. "I can catch it if I want

to,” he said boastfully.

“I don’t believe you can. Now let’s see you do it. If you do I’ll tell your mother when she returns what a spry youngster you are.”

Buster, swelling with pride and ambition, made a dart for the flickering sun-beam. At the same time Loup leaped into the air, and landed right at the mouth of the cave, with Buster on the outside. He was cut off from retreat, and Loup leered so cruelly at him that a spasm of fear ran down his spine. He wished now that he hadn’t disobeyed his mother, but it was too late, and he set up a little cry of terror.

What Loup the Lynx did to him, and how Buster escaped to plunge into more adventures, will be told in the next story.

Source:

Walsh, George Ethelbert. “When Buster Was a Cub.” *Buster the Big Brown Bear*. Chicago: The John C. Winston Company, 1922. 9 – 14. Electronic.