

Buster in a Railroad Wreck

by George Ethelbert Walsh

The circus was preparing to move into its winter quarters, and it was the confusion of packing that caused Buster to get mixed up with Spot and Ocelot in their cages. His injuries were very slight, and within a few days after Chiquita had bound them up his legs were as good as new.

He felt a little angry at the Leopard and Jungle Cat for attacking him when fast asleep, but Buster wasn't the kind to nurse a grudge. When his wrath cooled a little he actually laughed at the occurrence. Strolling outside to where the cages were standing, he grinned at the Leopard.

"You got a good dig at me, Spot," he said, "but with that last cuff I gave you I guess we can call it even. Head ache yet?"

Spot didn't reply, but paced his narrow cage in restless dissatisfaction. Buster turned to the Jungle Cat.

"How about you, Ocelot! Got over your scare yet? I didn't touch you, but you looked as scared as a rat in a trap when I shook your cage."

Ocelot showed the same silent contempt and refused to reply other than with a low snarl. Buster turned to Old Lion.

"The only cheerful one I find in this group is you, Old Lion," he added. "Spot and Ocelot don't look happy, and Timber the Wolf acts as if he had an ingrowing pain in his stomach. How about you?"

"I'm always cheerful," replied Old Lion. "That's why I've grown bald and toothless, and lived to a good old age. Spot and Ocelot will die young if they don't change their manners. So will you, Buster."

"Why," stammered Buster, "I do try to be cheerful. I didn't know I was anything else."

"That may be," replied Old Lion, "but you're too ready for a fight. Every battle you get in shortens your life by so many days."

"I don't fight unless I'm attacked," was the quick reply.

"I didn't know the animals attacked you the other night in the circus. You started the fight."

"Yes, but not until after they had attacked Chiquita," Buster said indignantly. "I had to protect her, for she was a friend of mine."

"Are you going to fight to protect all your friends in this world?" asked Old Lion sleepily. "If you do, I predict you will die young. Now I must go to sleep, for we begin our long journey soon, and I do hate riding on a train. It rasps my nerves."

Buster never knew how seriously to take the Old Lion's words, but he was a companionable and

harmless old fellow, and sometimes rambled on just to hear himself talk. He was getting so old that talking was the easiest thing to do, and between eating and sleeping that was about all he did. Sometimes he appeared in the circus as a fierce old lion, who had killed any number of keepers, but it was growing harder and harder for him to assume the pose. He wasn't fierce looking at all, except when he roared, and that was such an exertion he seldom did it unless prodded by the attendants.

"How does it feel to ride on a train?" Buster asked when he saw that the Old Lion was going to drop off asleep right before him.

"How does it feel?" he drawled. "Why, it feels as if all the bones in your body were rattling, and when the train stops—and it's stopping all the time when it isn't going—you stand on your head and then on your tail, and if you're lucky you don't die of fright."

"It must be a wonderful experience," remarked Buster.

"It is, and you won't enjoy it. I don't know what trains were invented for unless it was to torture those who ride in them. But when we get there we'll have a long rest."

"Where?" asked Buster.

"Where we're going, and when you get there you wonder why you came, and where you are. Now do you understand?"

Buster laughed good-naturedly, for his quizzing was making the Old Lion irritable. He wanted to sleep and Buster strolled away, leaving him to enjoy his nap.

The next day the animals were taken aboard the train. Some of the harmless ones were led there and tied to posts in box cars, and others like Ocelot and Spot were lifted aboard in their stout cages. No chance could be taken with them.

Buster found himself in a small compartment of a baggage car, with Chiquita occupying a seat just forward of him. She trusted him so much that she liked to have him near her. But as he had never been on a railroad journey before he was fastened in the car by a chain.

"You might forget yourself, Buster, or get excited, and try to jump off when the train was moving," she said to him, when chaining him up. "It isn't because I don't trust you. You understand that, don't you?"

Buster nodded his head, as she patted him, and looked at the chain. It was not a very strong one, and he smiled at the thought of what he could do to it if he wanted to escape. He could snap it in two with one jerk of his powerful body.

The train started finally, and Buster was as interested and excited as a child on her first railroad journey. The jolting and rattling began almost at once. He recalled Old Lion's words, and wondered if he was groaning in agony. Such rolling and jerking were enough to rattle Old Lion's teeth loose. And Spot and Ocelot! How did they like the noise and confusion?

The train steamed along slowly at first, and then faster. Through a window in the baggage car Buster could see the houses and trees flashing past as if they were all running in the opposite direction.

It was a funny sensation. Instead of being frightened by it, Buster enjoyed it.

“I never ran so fast in my life,” he said to himself. “Even Loup the Lynx couldn’t run as fast as this.”

He stopped and scowled. He never thought of Loup without growing angry. The Lynx had treated him in a cowardly, cruel way, and Buster somehow wanted to punish him for it. But there seemed little prospect of his ever meeting the Lynx again.

“Oh, well,” Buster sighed, “I can’t spoil my temper thinking of something that happened in the past.”

Still right down in his heart he had a great desire to go back to the woods where he had been born. Perhaps his mother was alive yet, and he would dearly like to see her again. How surprised she would be to find him grown up, fully as big as she, and far more powerful!

Suddenly in the midst of these thoughts there came a grinding shriek outside, and the most fearful of explosions. Buster raised his head to listen, and then he was thrown against the opposite side of the baggage car with such force that the chain snapped. Everything began to break and fall down upon him, the whole roof of the car collapsing.

Stunned by the fall, and unable to understand what had happened, Buster lay there a moment in silence. Everything was quiet after that awful noise, but wild shrieks of Ocelot, Spot and other animals soon filled the air. Then came the deafening hiss of steam, and shouts and cries of men.

What had happened! Buster was curious to know what all this noise meant, and finding himself loose, with no roof over him, he climbed out of the wreck. It was dark outside, but there were many lights flashing around.

Buster walked down the track where a group of men were at work. They paid no attention to him, and he sat down to wait. Chiquita would come along soon to claim him. But he waited and waited, and nobody paid any attention to him. Finally, he got up and wandered off in the fields, and before he stopped he was lost and couldn’t find his way back again.

“I think I’ll sleep here until morning,” he said, seeking a good resting place under a tree. “Then I’ll find my way back to the train.”

But it wasn’t the train he found. It was the little girl who had given him candy that day he danced for pennies.

Source:

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