

Buster is to be Sent to the Zoo

by George Ethelbert Walsh

It seemed almost like a fairy story to the little girl's father when she told him how Buster had climbed through the window of her room, and how she had covered him up with the bed-clothes to protect him from the men. And he didn't believe in fairy stories! In fact, he didn't believe just then that he was awake and hearing things. It surely was all a dream.

But there was Buster on the stairs, and his little girl hugging the great big, shaggy creature. Why, with one blow the bear could crush the life out of her! It made him tremble to think of it. He tried to call her away, but she didn't hear him. She was talking to Buster, who seemed to understand.

"Now, papa, you see he won't hurt me," she said finally, "and I won't let the men hurt him. We must do something for him."

"Yes, yes, dear," was the stammering reply. "But what?"

"Can't we keep him here?"

The man smiled for the first time. "Where——in your bed-room?"

"No-o, but maybe outdoors. I think he likes outdoors the best."

"But, dear, he would never be happy here, and he'd frighten all of our neighbors. He may be good to you, but he might be ugly to others."

"Not if they were kind to him," was the confident answer.

"Maybe not! Maybe not! But we must think of it."

He was quiet for a moment, watching Buster out of the corner of his eyes. He was less afraid of the bear than at first. Something in his eyes made him think that perhaps his little girl's trust was not misplaced after all. But he had a natural fear of all wild animals, and did not like to run any risks.

"I'll tell you, dear," he added finally, "we'll put Buster in the cellar until the men have gone, and then——then we'll telegraph to the owners of the circus. They will come for him, and he'll be better off with them than with us."

"But maybe he ran away from the circus because they were cruel to him," protested Nell. "I don't want him to go back then."

"I don't know about that, but I read in the papers that the circus people are going out of business. Their loss of animals in the smash-up decided them to give up the show business. Chiquita, their famous trainer, was injured so she'll never go back to performing again. I believe she's in the hospital now, and won't be out for a month or two."

Now all this was news to Buster. They couldn't understand how eager he was to learn all about

the circus. If Chiquita was injured in the wreck, then perhaps Spot and Ocelot and Old Lion were hurt, too, or even dead.

It made him very sad, for it meant the end of his circus life. He would never want to perform for another trainer now that Chiquita was gone. Poor Chiquita! Buster shed a tear for her, for she had been his dear friend, and he knew now that he couldn't help her or ever see her again.

"Then, papa," broke in little Nell again, "we can keep Buster, can't we?"

"Only a few days, dear," was the smiling reply. "We have no place to keep him, and I'm sure he'd soon try to escape."

The little girl pouted, and looked anxiously at Buster before speaking. "Then what will become of him?" she added. "He won't have any home at all. That will be dreadful, papa, and he's been so good to me."

"Ah!" exclaimed her father suddenly, his eyes brightening. "I have it. We'll send him to the Zoo. We'll make them a present of him if the circus people don't come to claim him."

The little girl was not exactly sure that she approved of this, and she continued pouting and looking at Buster. "But won't they shut him up in a cage, and keep him there all the time?" she queried. "I don't think I'd like to be caged forever and forever, would you?"

The question was addressed to her father, but Buster answered it with a vigorous shake of the head. He didn't know anything about the Zoo. It was a place he had never heard about, but if they kept bears caged up there all the time he didn't care to know more about it. It certainly was a dreadful place.

He had often pitied Spot and Ocelot for being shut up in their cages all the time, but he blamed them a good deal for that. They wouldn't behave themselves decently, and it served them right. But that was no reason why he should be kept in a cage all the rest of his life. No, he preferred to be free.

"My dear," Buster heard the father say after a pause, "that is the only wise thing to do. Keeping him here is simply out of the question. We must put him in the cellar until I can notify the authorities. Then they'll put him in a cage at the Zoo, and you can go and see him as often as you like."

The thought of being able to see Buster at the Zoo made her feel better, and she turned and whispered to him: "I'll come every week to see you, Buster, and I'll bring you sugar and peanuts and candy, and everything."

Buster smiled, for he knew that she meant what she said, but he was greatly troubled in mind. Could he, for the sake of seeing the little girl once a week, endure prison for the rest of his life? All the outdoor freedom would then be denied him. He couldn't walk around, nor perform before people in the circus; he couldn't even crawl under a pile of canvas or a clump of bushes to sleep. He would always be behind those iron bars.

He remembered how Old Lion had complained of the monotony of life in the cage, and Old Lion had grown old and weak in doing nothing. Spot, Ocelot and Timber had never become reconciled to their captivity, but paced their cages day and night longing to escape.

Buster drew a great sigh, and glanced out of the window. He saw green trees, smiling fields and tinkling brook. Ah, how he loved those! No, he could not leave them forever. He started for the outside door as if to leave the house.

“Don’t let him out, Nell,” the little girl’s father said. “The men and dogs are out there. Do you think you can get him down the cellar for the night?”

“Yes, papa, he’ll come with me,” was the answer. “Won’t you, Buster?”

Buster nodded, and followed her. He had no wish to go outside and fall in the hands of his pursuers. So he meekly followed the little girl down the stairs to the cellar where he was safe from all his enemies. It was a wide, roomy cellar, and Buster felt quite content there, but the thought that the men might call for him on the morrow to take him away to the Zoo spoiled his happiness.

When the little girl left him, he had made up his mind. Before morning he would break out of the cellar and escape. There had come into his mind a vision of the woods where he had been born, and a great desire to find his way back. Could he do it? In the next story you will hear how he set out on his long journey, and what happened to him.

Source:

Walsh, George Ethelbert. “Buster is to be Sent to the Zoo.” *Buster the Big Brown Bear*. Chicago: The John C. Winston Company, 1922. 119 – 124. Electronic.