

Buster Returns to the North Woods

by George Ethelbert Walsh

Buster spent the rest of the day in the cellar of the house where the little girl lived, sleeping part of the time and playing with his little friend whenever she had the time to come down. There were many things in the cellar that smelt good—jams and jellies stored away in a closet, potatoes, apples and cabbages in bins, and boxes full of dry groceries—but Buster did not touch any of these. He ate what the little girl fed him, and nothing else.

As the day dragged along, and night approached, he thought more and more of the North Woods where he had been born. He saw the beautiful river that flowed past the cave, heard the tinkling of the waves and the songs of the birds, and sniffed the fragrance of the millions of wild flowers. He thought of his mother, who had mourned his death—of Loup the Lynx, who had driven him from home, and made him an exile.

And the more he thought of these things, the more anxious he was to return to the woods. He was not needed in the circus now. Chiquita had gone, and he would never find another trainer like her. The little girl was his friend and loved him, but he could have no home with her. Then the place for him was in the woods where he would be free to roam about and hunt as he chose.

It was nearly dark when the little girl said good-night to him. She kissed him on the tip of the nose, and Buster felt a desire to take her in his arms and hug her. But he knew that would never do. His gentlest hug might break her little bones and kill her. So he contented himself with a smile and grin, and waved a paw to her as she closed the door.

Buster ate the supper she had brought down to him. He felt that he needed it all for his great journey. It might be days before he could get another such supper. It was quite dark outside when he had finished.

But there were lights upstairs and sounds of voices. Buster sat down and waited until they had all gone to bed, and the house was as quiet as a mouse. Then he got up and began preparing for his escape. The windows were out of the question, for they were too small for him to crawl through. So he devoted himself to breaking through the outside door.

This was locked, but Buster leaned his heavy weight against it until the lock creaked and then snapped. The door sprung open so suddenly that he tumbled outside all in a heap. The night was clear and quiet. The noise made by the bursting of the lock did not seem to disturb anybody, and Buster started across the fields in a slow jog trot.

When he reached the border of the swamp, he skirted the edge instead of plunging through it. He finally came out on the road where he had frightened the man carrying a basket of pies and rolls. He smiled at the remembrance of it, and wondered if the man would come again with another basketful of good things.

Buster had started out with the intention of finding his way back to the North Woods, but he soon found himself in a quandary. Which way should he go to find them? And how far off were they?

He might have been compelled, after all, to return to the little girl's house and go to the Zoo for the rest of his days, if he hadn't stumbled by accident upon Sleepy the Opossum cuddled up in a crotch of a tree.

"Hello, Sleepy," he called, "can you direct me to the North Woods, and tell me how far I must travel to reach them?"

"Follow the wind, Buster," replied Sleepy, "and travel day and night until you get there. That's all I know."

The wind was blowing from the north, and after traveling in that direction all night, crossing fields, woods and swamps, he came to rest in a dense thicket. "I'll sleep here," he said, "until night, and then go on."

He didn't want to show himself in the day time, and so he slept soundly all day. When he stretched himself toward sundown, he saw Curly the Skunk nearby watching.

"How far is it to the North Woods, Curly?" he asked. "And which way do I go?"

"It's far again as you've traveled, Buster," was the reply, "and it will take you twice as long to reach it, for there's a big river to cross. Follow the moon, and you won't miss it."

Buster thanked him for this information, and as there was a bright moon he had no trouble in keeping in the right direction. As on the previous night he traveled until the dawn of a new day, and then once more sought refuge in a dense swamp to sleep.

He was awake bright and early, rising before the moon was up. This time he asked Washer the Raccoon, who responded promptly:

"Follow the trail made by White Tail the Deer until you come to the river. Then cross it, if you can. It's a long swim, and I wouldn't like to undertake it."

Again Buster thanked his little forest friend, and resumed his hard journey. He was pretty tired and dirty by this time, for he had walked through swamps and thickets of briars in the dark, and had fallen and stumbled a number of times. But he had to reach the North Woods where he would be in no further danger of capture. Now that he had decided to return to his old home, he wasn't going to be turned aside by anything.

He reached the bank of the river by dawn. It was certainly a wide river, and very swift. He walked in it and drank his fill of cool, refreshing water. Seeing Billy the Mink washing himself on the bank, he called to him: "Must I swim the river to reach the North Woods, Billy?"

"You certainly must," laughed Billy, "unless you can fly across. You haven't wings yet, have you, Buster?"

"Not yet, Billy."

Then taking a plunge in the deep, swift stream, Buster began his long swim. The current was so strong that it carried him far down from the point he had in view, and at times it seemed as if he wasn't

making any headway at all. His long tramp in the woods began to tell on him, and he puffed and grunted as never before.

But he was a powerful swimmer, and in time his feet touched sandy bottom on the other side. He waded through the shallow water until he stood on dry land once more.

“My, Buster, you look like a drowned rat!” exclaimed a voice in the bushes. He turned to see Groundy the Woodchuck smiling at him. “When did you arrive?” continued Groundy. “And how big you’ve grown! I hardly knew you at first.”

“How far am I from the North Woods, Brownny?” Buster interrupted.

“How far? Why, as far again as half.”

“This is no time for joking, Brownny. I want a plain, straightforward answer.”

“Well, then you’ll have it. You’re there now! You’re standing in the North Woods!”

Buster gave a little sigh of relief. So he was back home, in the woods where had been born! How good the trees and bushes looked and smelt! He sniffed the pines and spruces. He looked at the river he had crossed, and for the first time realized this was the stream that passed the door of his old home. By following it up he could come to the cave where his mother had lived, and where Loup the Lynx had found him that day when he tried to kill him.

If you want to hear more of Buster’s life you can follow him in the book “Buster the Big Brown Bear’s Adventures.”

Source:

Walsh, George Etherlbert. “Buster Returns to the North Woods.” *Buster the Big Brown Bear*. Chicago: The John C. Winston Company, 1922. 125 – 131. Electronic.