

Two Famous Swimmers

by Thornton W. Burgess

The bank of the Smiling Pool was a lovely place to hold school at that hour of the day, which you know was just after sun-up. Everybody who could get there was on hand, and there were several who had not been to school before. One of these was Grandfather Frog, who was sitting on his big, green, lily pad. Another was Jerry Muskrat, whose house was out in the Smiling Pool. Spotty the Turtle was also there, not to mention Longlegs the Heron. You see, they hadn't come to school but the school had come to them, for that is where they live or spend most of their time.

“Good morning, Jerry Muskrat,” said Old Mother Nature pleasantly, as Jerry's brown head appeared in the Smiling Pool. “Have you seen anything of Billy Mink or Little Joe Otter?”

“Little Joe went down to the Big River last night,” replied Jerry Muskrat. “I don't know when he is coming back, but I wouldn't be surprised to see him any minute. Billy Mink was here last evening and said he was going up the Laughing Brook fishing. He is likely to be back any time. One never can tell when that fellow will appear. He comes and goes continually. I don't believe he can keep still five minutes.”

“Who is that can't keep still five minutes?” demanded a new voice, and there was Billy Mink himself just climbing out on the Big Rock.

“Jerry was speaking of you,” replied Old Mother Nature. “This will be a good chance for you to show him that he is mistaken. I want you to stay here for a while and to stay right on the Big Rock. I may want to ask you a few questions.”

Just then Billy Mink dived into the Smiling Pool, and a second later his brown head popped out of the water and in his mouth was a fat fish. He scrambled back on the Big Rock and looked at Old Mother Nature a bit fearfully as he laid the fish down.

“I—I didn't mean to disobey,” he mumbled. “I saw that fish and dived for him before I thought. I hope you will forgive me, Mother Nature. I won't do it again.”

“Acting before thinking gets people into trouble sometimes,” replied Old Mother Nature. “However, I will forgive you this time. The fact is you have just shown your friends here something. Go ahead and eat that fish and be ready to answer questions.”

As Billy Mink sat there on the Big Rock every one had a good look at him. One glance would tell any one that he was a cousin of Shadow the Weasel. He was much larger than Shadow, but of the same general shape, being long and slender. His coat was a beautiful dark brown, darkest on the back. His chin was white. His tail was round, covered with fairly long hair which was so dark as to be almost black. His face was like that of Shadow the Weasel. His legs were rather short. As he sat eating that fish, his back was arched.

Old Mother Nature waited until he had finished his feast. “Now then, Billy,” said she, “I want you to answer a few questions. Which do you like best, night or day?”

“It doesn't make any particular difference to me,” replied Billy. “I just sleep when I feel like it, whether it be night or day, and then when I wake up I can hunt. It all depends on how I feel.”

“When you go hunting, what do you hunt?” asked Old Mother Nature.

Billy grinned. “Anything that promises a good meal,” said he. “I'm not very particular. A fat Mouse, a tender young Rabbit, a Chipmunk, a Frog, Tadpoles, Chickens, eggs, birds, fish; whatever happens to be easiest to get suits me. I am rather fond of fish, and that's one reason that I live along the Laughing Brook and around the Smiling Pool. But I like a change of fare, and so often I go hunting in the Green Forest. Sometimes I go up to Farmer Brown's for a Chicken. In the spring I hunt for nests of birds on the ground. In winter, if Peter Rabbit should happen along here when I was hungry, I might be tempted to sample Peter.” Billy snapped his bright eyes wickedly and Peter shivered.

“If Jerry Muskrat were not my friend, I am afraid I might be tempted to sample him,” continued Billy Mink.

“Pooh!” exclaimed Peter Rabbit. “You wouldn't dare tackle Jerry Muskrat.”

“Wouldn't I?” replied Billy. “Just ask Jerry how he feels about it.”

One look at Jerry's face showed everybody that Jerry, big as he was, was afraid of Billy Mink. “How do you hunt when you are on land?” asked Old Mother Nature.

“The way every good hunter should hunt, with eyes, nose and ears,” replied Billy. “There may be folks with better ears than I've got, but I don't know who they are. I wouldn't swap noses with anybody. As for my eyes, well, they are plenty good enough for me.”

“In other words, you hunt very much as does your cousin, Shadow the Weasel,” said Old Mother Nature.

Billy nodded. “I suppose I do,” said he, “but there's one thing he does which I don't do and that's hunt just for the love of killing.”

“Once in a while I may kill more than I can eat, but I don't mean to. I hunt for food, while he hunts just for the love of killing.”

“You all saw how Billy catches fish,” said Old Mother Nature. “Now, Billy, I want you to swim over to the farther bank and show us how you run.”

Billy obeyed. He slipped into the water, dived, swam under water for a distance, then swam with just his head out. When he reached the bank he climbed out and started along it. He went by a series of bounds, his back arched sharply between each leap. Then he disappeared before their very eyes, only to reappear as suddenly as he had gone. So quick were his movements that it was impossible for one of the little people watching to keep their eyes on him. It seemed sometimes as though he must have vanished into the air. Of course he didn't. He was simply showing them his wonderful ability to take advantage of every little stick, stone and bush.

“Billy is a great traveler,” said Old Mother Nature. “He really loves to travel up and down the Laughing Brook, even for long distances. Wherever there is plenty of driftwood and rubbish, Billy is

quite at home, being so slender he can slip under all kinds of places and into all sorts of holes. Quick as he is on land, he is not so quick as his Cousin Shadow; and good swimmer as he is, he isn't so good as his bigger cousin, Little Joe Otter. But being equally at home on land and in water, he has an advantage over his cousins. Billy is much hunted for his fur, and being hunted so much has made him very keen-witted. Mrs. Billy makes her home nest in a hole in the bank or under an old stump or under a pile of driftwood, and you may be sure it is well hidden. There the babies are born, and they stay with their mother all summer. Incidentally, Billy can climb readily. Billy is found all over this great country of ours. When he lives in the Far North his fur is finer and thicker than when he lives in the South. I wish Little Joe Otter were here. I hoped he would be."

"Here he comes now," cried Jerry Muskrat. "I rather expected he would be back." Jerry pointed towards where the Laughing Brook left the Smiling Pool on its way to the Big River. A brown head was moving rapidly towards them. There was no mistaking that head. It could belong to no one but Little Joe Otter. Straight on to the Big Rock he came, and climbed up. He was big, being one of the largest members of his family. He was more than three feet long. But no one looking at him could mistake him for any one but a member of the Weasel family. His legs were short, very short for the length of his body. His tail was fairly long and broad. His coat was a rich brown all over, a little lighter underneath than on the back.

"What's going on here?" asked Little Joe Otter, his eyes bright with interest.

"We are holding a session of school here today," explained Old Mother Nature. "And we were just hoping that you would appear. Hold up one of your feet and spread the toes, Little Joe."

Little Joe Otter obeyed, though there was a funny, puzzled look on his face. "Whyee!" exclaimed Peter Rabbit. "His toes are webbed like those of Paddy the Beaver!"

"Of course they're webbed," said Little Joe. "I never could swim the way I do if they weren't webbed."

"Can you swim better than Paddy the Beaver?" asked Peter.

"I should say I can. If I couldn't, I guess I would go hungry most of the time," replied Little Joe.

"Why should you go hungry? Paddy doesn't," retorted Peter.

"Paddy doesn't live on fish," replied Little Joe. "I do and that's the difference. I can catch a fish in a tail-end race, and that's going some."

"You might show us how you can swim," suggested Old Mother Nature.

Little Joe slipped into the water. The Smiling Pool was very still and the little people sitting on the bank could look right down and see nearly to the bottom. They saw Little Joe as he entered the water and then saw little more than a brown streak. A second later his head popped out on the other side of the Smiling Pool.

"Phew, I'm glad I'm not a fish!" exclaimed Peter and everybody laughed.

"You may well be glad," said Old Mother Nature. "You wouldn't stand much chance with Little

Joe around. Like Billy Mink, Little Joe is a great traveler, especially up and down the Laughing Brook and the Big River. Sometimes he travels over land, but he is so heavy and his legs are so short that traveling on land is slow work. When he does cross from one stream or pond to another, he always picks out the smoothest going. Sometimes in winter he travels quite a bit. Then when he comes to a smooth hill, he slides down it on his stomach. By the way, Little Joe, haven't you a slippery slide somewhere around here?"

Little Joe nodded. "I've got one down the Laughing Brook where the bank is steep," said he. "Mrs. Otter and I and our children slide every day."

"What do you mean by a slippery slide?" asked Happy Jack Squirrel, who was sitting in the Big Hickory-tree which grew on the bank of the Smiling Pool.

Old Mother Nature smiled. "Little Joe Otter and his family are quite as fond of play as any of my children," said she. "They get a lot of fun out of life. One of their ways of playing is to make a slippery slide where the bank is steep and the water deep. In winter it is made of snow, but in summer it is made of mud. There they slide down, splash into the water, then climb up the bank and do it all over again. In winter they make their slippery slide where the water doesn't freeze, and they get just as much fun in winter as they do in summer."

"I suppose that means that Little Joe doesn't sleep in winter as Johnny Chuck does," said Peter.

"I should say not," exclaimed Little Joe. "I like the winter, too. I have such a warm coat that I never get cold. There are always places where the water doesn't freeze. I can swim for long distances under ice and so I can always get plenty of food."

"Do you eat anything but fish?" asked Peter Rabbit.

"Oh, sometimes," replied Little Joe. "Once in a while I like a little fresh meat for a change, and sometimes when fish are scarce I eat Frogs, but I prefer fish, especially Salmon and Trout."

"How many babies do you have at a time?" asked Happy Jack Squirrel.

"Usually one to three," replied Little Joe, "and only one family a year. They are born in my comfortable house, which is a burrow in the bank. There Mrs. Otter makes a large, soft nest of leaves and grass. Now, if you don't mind, I think I will go on up the Laughing Brook. Mrs. Otter is waiting for me up there."

Old Mother Nature told Little Joe to go ahead. As he disappeared, she sighed. "I'm very fond of Little Joe Otter," said she, "and it distresses me greatly that he is hunted by man as he is. That fur coat of his is valuable, and man is forever hunting him for it. The Otters were once numerous all over this great country, but now they are very scarce, and I am afraid that the day isn't far away when there will be no Little Joe Otter. I think this will do for to-day. There are two other members of the Weasel family and these, like Little Joe and Billy Mink, are continually being hunted for their fur coats. I will tell you about them to-morrow."

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