

Billy Mink Goes Dinnerless

by Thornton W. Burgess

Down the Laughing Brook came Billy Mink. He was feeling very good that morning, was Billy Mink, pleased with the world in general and with himself in particular. When he reached the Smiling Pool he swam out to the Big Rock. Little Joe Otter was already there, and not far away, lazily floating, with his head and back out of water, was Jerry Muskrat.

"Hello, Billy Mink," cried Little Joe Otter.

"Hello yourself," replied Billy Mink, with a grin.

"Where are you going?" asked Little Joe Otter.

"Nowhere in particular," replied Billy Mink.

"Let's go fishing down to the Big River," said Little Joe Otter.

"Let's!" cried Billy, diving from the highest point on the Big Rock.

So off they started across the Green Meadows towards the Big River. Half way there they met Reddy Fox.

"Hello, Reddy! Come on with us to the Big River, fishing," called Billy Mink.

Now Reddy Fox is no fisherman, though he likes fish to eat well enough. He remembered the last time he went fishing and how Billy Mink had laughed at him when he fell into the Smiling Pool. He was just about to say "no" when he changed his mind.

"All right, I'll go," said Reddy Fox.

So the three of them raced merrily across the Green Meadows until they came to the Big River. Now Billy Mink and Little Joe Otter are famous fishermen and can swim even faster than the fish themselves. But Reddy Fox is a poor swimmer and must depend upon his wits. When they reached the bank of the Big River they very carefully crawled down to a sandy beach. There, just a little way out from shore, a school of little striped perch were at play. Billy Mink and Little Joe Otter prepared to dive in and each grab a fish, but Reddy Fox knew that he could not swim well enough for that.

"Wait a minute," whispered Reddy. "Billy Mink, you go up the river a little way and swim out beyond where the fish are at play. Little Joe Otter, you go down the river a little way and swim out to join Billy Mink. Then both together rush in as fast as you can swim. The fish will be so frightened they will rush in where the water is shallow. Of course you will each catch one, anyway, and perhaps I may be so lucky as to catch one in the shallow water."

Billy Mink and little Joe Otter agreed, and did just as Reddy Fox had told them to. When they were between the playing fish and deep water they started in with a rush. The little striped perch were young and foolish. When they saw Billy Mink and Little Joe Otter they rushed madly away from them

without looking to see where they were going to. As Reddy Fox had foreseen would be the case, a lot of them became stranded where the water was too shallow for swimming, and there they jumped and flapped helplessly.

Reddy was waiting for them and in a twinkling his little black paw had scooped half a dozen fish high and dry on the beach. Billy Mink and Little Joe Otter were too busy watching the fish to see what Reddy was doing. He had caught six fish and these he hid under a log. When Billy Mink and Little Joe Otter swam ashore, Reddy was the picture of disappointment, for he had nothing to show, while the others each had a plump little fish.

"Never mind," said Little Joe Otter, "I'll give you the next one I catch."

But Billy Mink jeered at Reddy Fox. "Pooh! you're no fisherman, Reddy Fox! If I couldn't catch fish when they are chased right into my hands I'd never go fishing."

Reddy Fox pretended to be indignant. "I tell you what, Billy Mink," said he, "if I don't catch more fish than you do to-day I'll bring you the plumpest chicken in Farmer Brown's dooryard, but if I do catch more fish than you do you will give me the biggest one you catch. Do you agree?"

Now Billy Mink is very fond of plump chicken and here was a chance to get one without danger of meeting Bowser the Hound, who guards Farmer Brown's chickens. So Billy Mink agreed to give Reddy Fox the biggest fish he caught that day if Reddy could show more fish than he could at the end of the day. All the time he chuckled to himself, for you know Billy Mink is a famous fisherman, and he knew that Reddy Fox is a poor swimmer and does not like the water.

By and by they came to another sandy beach like the first one. They could see another school of foolish young fish at play. As before, Reddy Fox remained on shore while the others swam out and drove the fish in. As before Reddy caught half a dozen, while Billy Mink and Little Joe Otter each caught one this time. Reddy hid five and then pretended to be so tickled over catching one, the smallest of the lot, that Billy Mink didn't once suspect a trick.

Two or three times more Reddy Fox repeated this. Then he discovered a big pickerel sunning himself beside an old log floating in deep water. Reddy couldn't catch Mr. Pickerel, for the water was deep. What should he do? Reddy sat down to think. Finally he thought of a plan. Very cautiously he backed away so as not to scare the big fish. Then he called Billy Mink. When Billy saw the big pickerel, his mouth watered, too, and his little black eyes sparkled.

Very quietly Billy slipped into the water back of the old log. There was not so much as a ripple to warn the big pickerel. Drawing a long breath, Billy dived under the log, and coming up under the big pickerel, seized it by the middle. There was a tremendous thrashing and splashing, and then Billy Mink swam ashore and proudly laid the big fish on the bank.

"Don't you wish it was yours?" asked Billy Mink.

"It ought to be mine, for I saw it first," said Reddy Fox.

"But you didn't catch it and I did," retorted Billy Mink. "I'm going to have it for my dinner. My, but I do like fat pickerel!" Billy smacked his lips.

Reddy Fox said nothing, but tried his best to look disappointed and dejected. All the time he was chuckling inwardly.

For the rest of the day the fishing was poor. Just as Old Mother West Wind started for the Green Meadows to take her children, the Merry Little Breezes, to their home behind the Purple Hills, the three little fishermen started to count up their catch. Then Reddy brought out all the fish that he had hidden. When they saw the pile of fish Reddy Fox had, Billy Mink and Little Joe Otter were so surprised that their eyes popped out and their jaws dropped. Very foolish they looked, very foolish indeed, for Reddy had four times as many as either of them.

Reddy walked over to the big pickerel and picking it up, carried it over to his pile. "What are you doing with my fish?" shouted Billy Mink angrily.

"It isn't yours, it's mine!" retorted Reddy Fox.

Billy Mink fairly danced up and down he was so angry. "It's not yours!" he shrieked. "It's mine, for I caught it!"

"And you agreed that your biggest fish should be mine if I caught more fish than you did. I've caught four times as many, so the pickerel is mine," retorted Reddy, winking at Little Joe Otter.

Then Billy Mink did a very foolish thing; he lost his temper completely. He called Reddy Fox bad names. But he did not dare try to take the big pickerel away from Reddy, for Reddy is much bigger than he. Finally he worked himself into such a rage that he ran off home leaving his pile of fish behind.

Reddy Fox and Little Joe Otter took care not to touch Billy Mink's fish, but Reddy divided his big pile with Little Joe Otter. Then they, too, started for home, Reddy carrying the big pickerel.

Late that night, when he had recovered his temper, Billy Mink began to grow hungry. The more he thought of his fish the hungrier he grew. Finally he could stand it no longer and started for the Big River to see what had become of his fish. He reached the strip of beach where he had so foolishly left them just in time to see the last striped perch disappear down the long throat of Mr. Night Heron.

And this is how it happened that Billy Mink went dinnerless to bed. But he had learned three things, had Billy, and he never forgot them—that wit is often better than skill; that it is not only mean but is very foolish to sneer at another; and that to lose one's temper is the most foolish thing in the world.

Source:

Burgess, Thornton. "Billy Mink Goes Dinnerless." *Mother West Wind's Animal Friends*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1912. 135 – 148. Electronic.