

HOW LITTLE BEAR LEARNED TO SWIM



BY FRANCES MARGARET FOX



Last summer Little Bear went on a long journey with his father and mother. The Three Bears had a beautiful time traveling through the big forest until they reached the banks of a deep, swift river. Then there was trouble, for Little Bear could not swim, nor did he wish to learn how to swim. He said he was afraid of the water.

“Father Bear can easily carry me over the river,” he suggested.

“Nonsense!” replied big Father Bear in gruff tones. “Nonsense, my son! You are old enough and strong enough to learn to swim. I will not carry you across the stream. Neither shall your mother.”

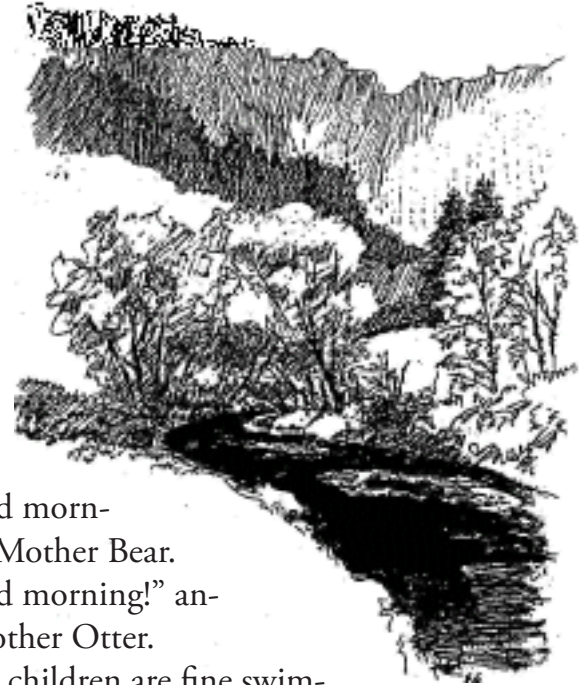
Just then there came Father Otter, swimming like a seal, and twisting and turning in the water like a fish.

“Perhaps the good otter will teach Little Bear to swim,” Mother Bear said, and then called to him.

“It is the easiest thing in the world to teach a little bear how to swim,” answered Father Otter. “Just throw him in!” And away he went, laughing over his shoulder.

“He must be joking,” observed Mother Bear quickly, because she was afraid that Father Bear would toss Little Bear into the river, and she did not like the idea.

At that moment Mother Otter came swimming down the river with her children. One of them climbed upon her shoulders and stared solemnly at Little Bear on the river bank.



“Good morning!” said Mother Bear.

“Good morning!” answered Mother Otter.

“Your children are fine swimmers,” added Mother Bear.

“Certainly,” answered Mother Otter. “Every one of them knows that our people have all been famous swimmers for centuries.”

“I suppose, then,” ventured Mother Bear, “that your children were born swimmers. You probably had trouble in keeping them out of the water when they were babies.”

Mother Otter laughed. “The trouble was to get them into the water,” she said, “because the silly little things were afraid. All young otters are afraid of the water and have to be put into it by force.”

“You do not mean it!” exclaimed Mother Bear, with great amazement in her tones.

“Indeed I do,” replied Mother Otter. “We had to push every one of our children into the water. Does Little Bear know how to swim?”

“No,” answered Mother Bear, shaking her head, “he is afraid to try.”

“Duck him,” advised Mother Otter, “duck him. There is no other way to teach a little bear to swim.”

And away she went, down the stream, intending to overtake Father Otter.

The little Otters kept looking back, hoping to see Father Bear toss Little Bear into the river. But Mother Bear begged him not to teach Little Bear to swim that day, and so the little Otters missed the fun.

That night the Three Bears camped beside the deep, swift river. After Little Bear was cuddled down in his bed of leaves and springy boughs, Mother Bear made Father Bear promise not to toss Little Bear into the river unless Little Bear said he wanted him to.

The next morning Father Bear was sorry that he had made the promise, because an honest-looking polecat who came across the stream and went into the woods told Father Bear and Mother Bear that the largest, sweetest blackberries in the forest were ripe on the other shore.

“And now,” whispered Mother Bear to Father Bear, “aren’t you sorry that you told him that we wouldn’t carry him over?”

“Sure enough, I am,” agreed Father Bear. And then he laughed at the joke on himself.

“Well,” suggested Mother Bear at last, “I shall coax Little Bear to let you toss him gently into the river, and I shall catch him if he finds he cannot swim.”

“Nonsense!” grumbled Father Bear, and stopped laughing. “While you coax,” he said, “I shall go for a walk.”

Coaxing did not do any good. When Little Bear saw his father wander away, he told his mother that he did not feel like going into the water that morning. He hoped she would please excuse him. And so she excused him.

Soon Father Bear came back, smiling and happy. “I have found a bridge,” said he. “An old log has fallen across the river a little way upstream, where, on the other side, blackberries are almost as big as ducks’ eggs. Little Bear can walk across on the log.”

“All right, I’ll do it,” promised Little Bear, and gladly followed his father until the Three Bears reached the bridge.

But while Little Bear was skipping joyfully over the log, trying to reach the opposite bank before his father and mother could swim across, the log turned over and sent Little Bear head first into the river. Fortunately, he knew enough to keep his mouth shut, and in a little while he bobbed up, shaking his head to get the water out of his eyes and his ears and paddling like a duck. That was all there was to it, because, ever after, Little Bear could swim.

Mother Bear believes to this day that Father Bear knew that the log would roll over. She believes it because, whenever anyone asks him, he says nothing, but just laughs.