

LITTLE BEAR'S PROMISE

BY FRANCES MARGARET FOX

Little Bear had never heard of the Pied Piper of Hamelin who rid the town of rats, and then, when he went back for his promised pay, was only laughed at, so that he piped away all the children of Hamelin town and never piped them back again. Mother Bear had never told Little Bear that story. However, she had taught her child to keep his promises, which was very fortunate, because one day the Pied Piper appeared when Little Bear was alone in the sunbright clearing which was his favorite playground.

It happened that day that Little Bear found his playground full of caterpillars, and he did not like caterpillars. They were everywhere—on the ground, on the grass, on flowers, on the trees, humping along and humping along, eating green leaves.

“Oh, you old humpty-humps,” exclaimed Little Bear, “I wish you would go away!”

But the caterpillars would not go away. They even began crawling over Little Bear. He shook them off and was about to run away when along came that man, tall and thin, with a sharp chin and a mouth where the smiles went out and in, and two blue eyes each like a pin.

And he was dressed half in red and half in yellow, and as we have often been told, he really was the strangest fellow. Around his neck he wore a red and yellow ribbon, and on it was hung something like a flute, and his fingers went straying up and down it as if he wished to be playing.

“I understand that you do not like caterpillars,” said this queer fellow to Little Bear. “Men call me the Pied Piper,” he went on when he saw that Little Bear was too surprised to speak. “And I know a way to draw after me everything that walks or flies or swims! What will you give me if I rid your playground of caterpillars?”

“I shall give you my porridge bowl,” answered Little Bear, “if you can take away these caterpillars.”

Little Bear afterward told his father and mother that he did not believe that the Pied Piper could do it.

Straightway the Pied Piper put the long pipe to his lips and began to play a tune—a strange, high little tune. And before the pipe had uttered three shrill notes the caterpillars humped after the Piper—thin ones, plump ones, skinny ones, woolly ones, striped ones, plain ones, great caterpillars, small caterpillars, lean ones, brawny ones, brown caterpillars, black caterpillars, gray ones, tawny ones, they all followed the Piper for their lives until they came to the edge of the river. Then the Piper suddenly stepped aside and down they tumbled and—were—drowned!

Only one too-plump caterpillar came humping slowly back to the playground, making great lamentation.

“What is the matter with you?” asked Little Bear, who had laughed until he was obliged to wipe away tears with the back of his paw at the sight of so many caterpillars following the Pied Piper.

“Oh me, oh my!” wailed the mournful caterpillar. “He said we should sleep in cradles of silk and wake up with wings of purple! It has been the dream of my life to be a butterfly with wings of gold and purple!”

“Cheer up,” comforted Little Bear, “you just spin yourself a cocoon caterpillar fashion and go to sleep, and you will surely find yourself turned into a butterfly when you wake up! Mother said so! Now there! Why didn’t I remember that caterpillars turn into butterflies, before I promised to give away my porridge bowl! I should like to have my playground full of butterflies! I wish I had thought of that! Now those poor old caterpillars are gone and I promised to give away my bowl! Maybe the Pied Piper will not come back!”

But he did. “I should like my bowl!” said he.

“I know that a promise is a promise,” agreed Little Bear promptly and sorrowfully. “You wait here until I run home after it and I shall give you my little bowl!”

And he did. As the Piper took the bowl and turned away, Father and Mother Bear came into the clearing.

“What are you doing with Little Bear’s bowl?” they demanded, and would have followed the

Pied Piper, but he put the pipe to his lips and began to play a little tune—a soft little tune, sweet and strange. And the music made Father Bear and Mother Bear stand still as if their feet had been tied to the ground.

“Oh, Little Bear!” they cried in terror. “It is the Pied Piper! Oh, Little Bear, do not follow him!”

“Indeed I could not if I wished to do so,” answered Little Bear, “because my feet will not go! The music has made me stand still too, and I hear voices singing, ‘Stay home with your father! Stay home with your mother! Stay home, Little Bear!’”

