

BROTHER TO THE BEARS

In the days of the people who are gone, there lived a small boy whose parents were dead. Having no home of his own, he lived sometimes in one wigwam and sometimes in another.

Because the lonely find their loneliness easier to bear when they are alone, he often went off by himself into the forest.

One fall day, after spending an afternoon in the woods, he discovered that he was lost. Night began to fall. Try as he might, he could not find his way back to the village. Darkness came. Still he attempted to retrace his steps.

After walking a great distance, he saw the light of a wigwam. As he came closer, he heard persons talking together.

Of course, he had no way of knowing what sort of people lived there. But he was too tired, cold and hungry to be much afraid. After hesitating only a moment, he went up to the wigwam and lifted the door blanket.

Imagine his astonishment when he saw not man but bears — an old she-bear and her two cubs — eating and talking together!

He would have run away, but the old bear beckoned for him to enter and the cubs pointed at his face and laughed so hard he could not believe he had any cause to fear them.

Moreover, the old bear gestured for him to take a seat near the fire, and handed him dried meat and a birchen vessel full of berries.

"Surely, this is a dream," he thought. "I have fallen asleep in the woods. In the morning, when I awake, I'll return to my village. But, in the meantime, these animals cannot hurt me -- for, after all, this is only a dream."

So he ate greedily of meat and berries and after he had eaten he, in truth, fell asleep.

When he awoke, he found that it was spring.

He had slept all winter in the den of the bears, although he felt no different than if he had slept a single night.

His first thought was: "I must hasten back to my village. I have been gone so long my people will have given me up for dead."

But then, he reflected: "Who is there to care whether or not I return? I am an orphan. The people fed me only from pity. They will be happier if I do not go back to them."

So he decided to stay with the bears as long as they would have him.

And he found, to his amazement and delight, that the old bear treated him exactly as she treated her sons, and the cubs treated him like a brother.

Soon, by listening carefully, he learned the language of the bears so that he could converse with them. The cubs taught him the games that are played by the young of the bear people. And they went fishing for smelts, the four of them, the three youngsters wading in the water and driving the fish toward the mother, who scooped them up with her paws and threw them on the riverbank, in the manner of bears.

The cubs were so young that the boy was their equal in strength and delighted in wrestling with them. The old bear, who was famous among her people for her wisdom, revealed to the boy many of the secrets of the forest that have been hidden from men.

Never had the boy been so happy. For now he had a family of his own.

Sometimes men passed through that part of the woods. Then he and the cubs would hide behind the old bear who would stand guard, sniffing the air, until long after the men disappeared from sight.

"If men see us they will attempt to kill us," she told

them. "If they make such an attempt, I will attack them. That will give you time to run away and hide where they cannot find you."

"When I grow up, I will gather together all the bears in the world and make war upon men," vowed the boy.

The cubs only laughed at him.

"Listen to the braggart," scoffed the smallest of the cubs. "Only this morning I beat him at wrestling; yet now he is ready to make war upon the whole race of men."

But the old bear did not laugh.

"Ah, my poor little one," she said, "you do not know what you are saying. Do not forget that you yourself belong to the people called men."

The boy almost wept.

"Don't say that!" he pleaded. "I am not a man, but a bear. You are my mother, and these are my brothers."

"We shall see. We shall see," said the old bear.

The boy wished so much to belong to the bear people that sometimes he imagined that long black hairs were beginning to sprout from his human flesh. Often, when he was alone, he stared at his hands until he almost believed that they were growing into paws strong enough to break a man's neck with a single blow. And he knelt by the river and stared at the reflection of his face, trying to convince himself that it was becoming more and more the face of a bear.

"I am a bear," he told the cubs. "A bear like you."

"Yes, yes," they assured him, "you are a bear."

But as time passed he came to seek this reassurance so often that they began to weary of it.

Besides, as the cubs grew they became so much stronger than he that he no longer wrestled with them. The old bear sometimes cuffed them for being too rough with him. And, of course, they were much quicker than he in learning the skills that must be acquired by all young bears. As fall approached again, they could snatch fish from the river almost as rapidly as their mother. The boy seldom managed to grab a fish and when he did it usually slipped out of his hand.

One day, when he had lived with the bears for almost a year, the old bear called him aside.

"Little one," she said, "you know that I love you as I love my own sons."

The boy threw his arms around her.

"Oh, yes, yes!" he cried. "And I love you as much as I could have loved my own mother, had I ever known her."

"I want you to know that it is because I love you that I am sending you away," said the old bear.

"Sending me away!" cried the boy. "Where will I go?"

"You will go back to your own people," said the old bear.

"But I am of the bear people!" said the boy.

"Do not talk nonsense, little one," said the old bear.

"Do you wear the skin of a bear? Are your hands a bear's paw? Is your face the face of a bear? No, you are a man and your place is with the race of men."

The boy pleaded with her, but the old bear was not to be gainsayed.

"If you stay here," she told him, "you will grow up to be the weakest and clumsiest bear in the forest. Other bears will scorn you. You will do well to feed yourself. Your sense of smell is so weak that you will never be able to detect the presence of the hunters in time to escape their shafts. And the hunter who kills you will not even bother to skin you -- of what use would be your pelt? He will leave your carcass for the scavengers. But if you go back to the world of men, you will become one of the greatest hunters and warriors in the world."

So the boy said goodbye to the old bear and the cubs and went back through the forest to his village, where the people had long ago decided that he was dead.

When he grew up, it was as the old bear had predicted: he became a great warrior and hunter, of whom songs were sung and stories told by the campfires. And he taught his children the language of the bears, and his children taught their children, so that his descendants can converse with bears to this very day.