

# The Three Bears of Porcupine Ridge

by Jean Thompson

“WOOF, woof, woof,” called the little black mother bear gruffly, turning over a rotten log with her snout and uncovering a fine ant’s nest.

“Woof, woof,” answered back the two round black balls of animated fur—the cubs, as they scrambled eagerly and clumsily over the log, and began to feed greedily upon their mother’s find.

The little black mother bear and her two cubs lived in a cozy den just below Porcupine Ridge, which happened to be far up on the side of Cushman Mountain. They were a happy little family, the three bears, and every day the two cubs grew more ball-like and lovable to their patient mother, who always managed to lead them to the very best feeding places. Through the dense, dark spruce forests, far down into the swamps below she took them, where they fed happily upon young frogs or crawfish, and the juicy sprouts of the skunk cabbages. Occasionally she would show them the way across the burnt swale, where the wild raspberries grew luscious and red.

The three bears nearly always slept inside their den the greater part of the day, but as soon as the hermit thrush began to sing her sleepy lullaby song, and the old gray hoot owl, who lived in a giant sycamore tree just below the Ridge, “who-oo, oo’d,” then Mrs. Bear would nudge the two sleeping cubs with her snout, and cuff them about with her great paws playfully, until they were wide awake. Then off they would all three start in the moonlight to make a night of it in the forest. And they never thought of coming back to the den again until morning, when they had usually satisfied their pressing hunger.

Oh, life on Porcupine Ridge was peaceful and happy enough for the old mother bear and her two roly-poly cubs, and they were very contented with life until one eventful day something happened which changed everything, and this was how it came about.

One night, when it was “dark o’ the moon,” Mrs. Bear discovered a great patch of ripe raspberries in the edge of the swamp, and so while the two cubs were busy feeding upon the luscious berries, she suddenly became possessed with a keen desire for an adventure. So plunging deep into the swamp, she was soon across its treacherous quagmires, on through the dense spruce bush, and soon came out upon the far side of the swamp. She headed for the sheep pasture at first, but soon lost all desire for fresh lamb, for just then her keen nose had scented something far more desirable and delicious. It was honey.

On and on scrambled Mrs. Bear through the sheep pasture, utterly forgetting the cubs; past the rail fence she waddled, where sat the old gobbler turkey and his ten timorous wives, fast asleep, but uttering little, flurried peepings even in their dreams. But Mrs. Bear passed them carelessly by, and hurried on, with little eager “woof, woof’s,” until she had come to the farmer’s home lot, and then she knew she had found that for which she searched, for suddenly she came upon five beehives. With her snout she soon managed to upset one hive, and then coat, snout and paws were soon smeared thickly with the sticky honey. Mrs. Bear might have wished the cubs were there, but if she did she was enjoying herself far too keenly to trouble about them then.

She soon finished one hive of honey and then turned over another, but as by this time she began

to feel that she had had plenty for a while, just out of pure mischief, with her snout and paws, she simply tipped over the other hives. Suddenly Mrs. Bear discovered that a few angry bees had awakened and were clinging tightly to her thick fur, whereupon she immediately started off for the swamp at a quick, shambling trot, for well she remembered a certain deep, muddy water-hole, and making straight for the spot, she was soon rolling and wallowing contentedly about, trying to rid herself of the troublesome bees, and the sticky honey. It was here that the cubs joined their mother, who grunted and “woof, woofed,” and as soon as the long yellow rays of approaching dawn began to shoot up from the other side of the mountain, the three bears scrambled back to their den on the Ridge, and were soon fast asleep.

Of course the farmer found his overturned beehives, the next morning, and angry enough he was, I can tell you.

“Ugh, a bear did this,” he grumbled, as he examined closely the great, wide footprints which Mrs. Bear had left all over the ground. By following the bear tracks the farmer soon knew just what ground the old bear had covered. He even traced her to the mud wallow where she had rid herself of the bees and honey. Then the farmer sat about concocting a scheme to catch Mrs. Bear, for well he knew she would return again after more honey. But if there is one thing in all the world which a bear enjoys eating more than honey, it is a great hunk of crumbly maple sugar, for bears have a wonderfully keen sweet tooth. The farmer climbed up Mount Cushman, and when he had reached a spot in the very heart of the spruce woods, which happened to be about a mile below Porcupine Ridge, he went to work and set a trap for Mrs. Bear, and this is how he went about it.

First he hollowed out a kind of den near a deep spring, around which grew quantities of jack-in-the-pulpit plants, for the bears dearly love to browse upon the tender shoots of these plants. Then in the hollow he placed the bear trap, made of strong steel. After setting the trap he covered it craftily over with a layer of loose twigs, upon which he put, last of all, a great piece of soft, springy moss. Back of the trap he laid the bait temptingly, which happened to be a dead woodchuck. So that when Mrs. Bear should step upon the moss tussock covering the steel trap, she would instantly spring it.

Then the farmer went home and waited, visiting the trap daily, to see if Mrs. Bear had been there. Of course she had visited the place, for there the farmer found bear tracks, but who cares for a dead woodchuck when the blackberries are ripe, the frogs young and tender, and there is even honey, if one cares to go a journey for it.

At last the farmer was almost in despair, thinking old Mrs. Bear never would be caught, and he knew when food grew scarce in winter time his turkeys and young lambs would no longer be safe from Mrs. Bear. So finally he thought out a new plan. And that very night when Mrs. Bear and the two cubs halted at the spring on their way down from the Ridge, to munch jack-in-the-pulpit sprouts, Mrs. Bear paused and stuck her black snout inquisitively inside the farmer’s den, and what do you suppose met her astonished eyes? Right over back of the moss tussock which concealed the trap, instead of the dead woodchuck was a great, brown hunk of hard maple sugar. Mrs. Bear would travel far for honey, but she completely lost her head when she scented maple sugar, so she planted one great, padded foot in the center of the moss tussock, then, before she knew it, something stung and gripped like fire into her great fore-paw, and with a sudden howl of surprise and rage, she backed out of the den, trying with all her might to shake off the cruel, biting thing which hurt her foot so wretchedly.

Meantime, the cubs sat up in amazement among the tall ferns, and looking at their mother’s sad plight, howled and whined in sympathy.

Quite mad by this time with her agony and rage, not knowing what she was about, Mrs. Bear bolted, with the trap still clinging to her foot. Cutting a great, wide path in her flight through the underbrush on she ran. Up and down the mountain she tore, all night long, with the cruel trap ever biting deeper and deeper into her foot at every turn.

“Bang, bang,” went the farmer’s gun, and the cubs hearing the loud noise, terrified out of their small wits, scurried off and lost themselves in the shadows of the great woods, while their poor mother, with a scream of baffled rage and pain dropped crashing into the underbrush.

But the bear happened to be simply stunned by the shot, and so the farmer and his boys took stout ropes and tied her four feet together and slipping a stout pole between them, in this fashion they carried her down the mountain, and then chained her to a tree near the barn. For the farmer and his boys were very proud of their live bear, and proposed to exhibit their treasure to all the neighbors.

Oh, how miserable and unhappy the poor, little black bear mother was, tied fast to the tree, while boys and men poked at her and prodded her with sharp sticks, just for the sake of hearing her fierce, angry growls. Sometimes, when too hard pressed, she would even climb into the tree, to get away from her tormentors, but in vain; the chain was too short for her to get very far away from them all, so she just howled and howled.

“I shall have to put an end to that old bear; she’s too noisy,” remarked the farmer that night, as he went to bed.

The moon came up that night over Cushman Mountain, big and yellow, and afar off among the thick, dark spruces, even above the singing of the frogs, Mrs. Bear’s little round, alert ears had caught the sound of an occasional, helpless whimpering cry, which seemed to her strangely familiar. It was the two motherless little cubs crying, hunting everywhere for their mother. Slowly but surely they were tracking her and even now they were coming down the mountain slope, and very soon the mother bear, straining her little red eyes, caught sight of the two little round shambling forms of the cubs, stealing from behind the barn.

The next thing they were all rubbing noses and “woof, woofing” together happily, while their mother fondled them eagerly, cuffing them playfully about with her free paw, almost forgetting about her smarting wounds, so delighted was she to have the cubs with her once more.

But time was flying fast; already had the old hoot owl come back from his night’s wanderings, and gone to sleep in his hole in the sycamore tree. Pale yellow rays had begun to take the place of the moon which had set; dawn was on the way, and the bears realized that they must get away.

Fiercely tugging at the cruel chain Mrs. Bear began to worry it, giving mighty tugs and wrenches, while the two cubs whimpered a chorus of encouragement. Finally something gave way, and trailing a long length of chain behind her, old Mrs. Bear and the two cubs made straight across Balsam Swamp, and then scrambled and clawed their way up the side of Cushman Mountain, and not an instant too soon, for by this time the sun had come up, and day had dawned.

Then the little black bear and her cubs crawled into their den under Porcupine Ridge, and the tall, wild sweet ferns, the clematis and nettles fell over their door, and you never would have suspected that the bear family were safe at home again, and had no fears whatever for anything, for they had all

gone fast asleep.

Source:

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