

BEST FRIENDS



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The story in this book is about a poor boy called Billy who lived with his parents near a forest. Billy couldn't go to school because he had to catch fish to sell, to help his family.

Billy becomes friends with an otter called Swimmy who lived in the stream in the forest. Swimmy helps Billy to catch lots of fish. After a while Billy was able to go to school because his mother made enough money selling fish. Suddenly Swimmy stops coming to help Billy. After a few days Swimmy comes back with his tail burnt and his paw broken. Some men were cutting down the forest and burning the trees. Lots of animals had died or run away. Billy and his mother treat Swimmy and look after him.

Billy bravely decides to tell the King what had happened. He and Swimmy make the long journey to the capital city to meet the King. Along the way, they are joined by lots of people who want to help them. After an exciting adventure, Swimmy manages to hand-over a message to the King. Billy explains the whole episode to the King. The King visits the forest and stops the destruction. He proclaims the forest a protected area. Billy and Swimmy become heroes. The otter is declared the national symbol of the country.

The story shows the importance of the forest and introduces the otter to children.

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Once upon a time, in a land far away, there was a big forest. At the edge of this forest there was a small house. A small boy called Billy lived here with his mother and father. Billy's father had a small farm. They were very poor. Billy couldn't go to school because he had to help his parents. Billy had to catch fish in the stream near their house for his mother to sell at the market every day. He had to get up early morning to catch the fish and because he couldn't catch a lot of fish, his mother couldn't earn enough money to send Billy to school.

One morning while Billy was fishing, he saw some ripples in the water. When he looked closely, he saw that it was a small animal swimming towards him. The animal suddenly came up from the water near him. This was an animal Billy had never seen before. It was short, small and long. It had dark brown fur, a long tail, small black eyes and small ears. His claws at the end of his feet looked strong. There was a fish in his mouth.

The animal shook his body and water droplets went everywhere. He dropped the fish on to the ground and said "Hi there!"

Billy was surprised, the animal could talk! He said, "Hello, what are you?"

The animal replied, "I'm an otter. My name is Swimmy, because I like to swim a lot. I live on the other side of the forest. I thought I'll swim this way and see what's happening here. What's your name? What are you doing?"

Billy told him his name and that he was fishing. “Why are you fishing?” asked Swimmy.

“Because we are poor! My mother sells the fish in the market to get money. I can catch only one fish at a time, so it takes a long time to get even a few fish. I can’t go to school because I have to do this the whole day,” Billy said sadly.

“I love to eat fish. I can catch fish very quickly. Shall I catch some fish for you?” asked Swimmy.

“Yes, please!” said Billy happily.



So Swimmy dived back into the water. He came up very quickly with a fish in his mouth. He caught a fish every few minutes. Soon there was a big pile of fish near Billy. Billy started jumping up and down and shouting excitedly. He was so happy that Swimmy had caught lots of fish for him.

Swimmy suddenly put his head out of the water and asked, “Is that enough fish for you, Billy?”

“Oh yes, thank you so much Swimmy. I have never caught so many fish. My mother will be so happy. Thank you, thank you!”

“You’re welcome,” said Swimmy doing rolls and spins in the water. “If you want, I’ll catch fish for you every day. Then you can go to school!”

“That would be wonderful. Thank you. I must go and give these fish to my mother. I’ll come back in the evening and we can play,” said Billy.

“That would be very nice. I’ll be here. Bye till then,” said Swimmy and with a final flip and roll, swam away.

Billy carried the basket full of fish to his mother as fast as he could. The basket was much heavier than usual!

His mother was really surprised to see Billy come home so early. “You are home early today, Billy...didn’t you catch any fish?”

“I got lots of fish, much more than usual,” Billy said excitedly and told his mother what happened.

“What a good friend you have made Billy. I have never seen otters on this side of the forest,” Billy’s mother said. “We will get more money when I sell all this fish at the market. If we can do this every day, you can go to school.”

“I can’t wait to go to school!” Billy said happily.

Billy went to the forest again in the evening and Swimmy was waiting for him. They played together until it started getting dark. Swimmy promised to come back the next morning and swam away. When Billy went home, his mother was back from the market with lots of money from selling the fish. They were very happy.

The next morning, Billy went to the stream and was just about to start fishing when Swimmy swam by and started fishing for him. In about half an hour, he had caught a lot of fish. So Billy could go home early and his mother could go to the market early.

This went on for some time. Billy started to go to school, because they earned enough money from selling the fish. Also, Billy was coming home early after catching fish, so there was time to go to school. So Billy and his family were very happy and Swimmy was happy that he could help them.



One day Billy went fishing as usual in the morning. But Swimmy wasn't waiting for him, and Swimmy didn't come that day. Swimmy didn't come the next day either. Billy and his parents saw a large plume of smoke from the other side of the forest where Swimmy lived. They started to worry about Swimmy.

On the third day, Swimmy didn't come for a long time. Billy was worried about Swimmy, because he had not come for three days and he was late today. Billy thought Swimmy may be sick or had hurt himself.

After a long time, Swimmy came, swimming slowly. The fur on his tail was burnt and one of his paws was limp.

"Swimmy, Swimmy what happened? Why didn't you come? Why are you so late today? I was so worried! What happened to your paw?" Billy asked worriedly.

"Oh Billy, something awful has happened! Some men have come with saws and axes. They have cut down the trees on the other side of the forest. Now they are burning the forest. Animals have died and other animals are running away from the forest. The stream where my home is has been filled with all sorts of cut down trees and leaves and is dirty and the fish are dying. My home was destroyed too," Swimmy said sadly.

"What happened to your paw and tail?" Billy asked.



“My tail got burnt when I was trying to save my house. A big branch fell on my paw. I had to pull and pull to take my paw from under the branch. I think the paw is broken.”

“Let’s go to my Mommy. I’m sure she can fix that,” Billy said and picked up Swimmy carefully and put him in the basket. Then Billy ran home.

“Mommy, Mommy, look what’s happened to Swimmy!” Billy panted out.

“Oh, you poor thing. Let me have a look at that paw,” Billy’s mother said. She took Swimmy out of the basket and placed him on the dining table. She had a look at his paw.

“I don’t think it’s broken. I think it’s just a sprain. I’ll bandage it and in a few days it should be as good as new,” Billy’s mother said as she examined Swimmy’s paw. She bandaged the paw tightly and then applied some herbal salve on Swimmy’s burnt tail.

“There...that should do it. Now tell me what happened to you Swimmy,” Billy’s mother said.

So both Billy and Swimmy took turns in explaining what had happened to the forest and Swimmy’s home.

“What bad men! We should do something. Otherwise they will soon destroy the whole forest, even this area. Then we’ll have to leave this place too,” Billy’s mother was angry when she heard the story. “You should rest now Swimmy,” she said and got a basket lined with soft cloth for Swimmy to sleep in.

When Billy's father came home in the evening, they told the whole story to him. He was also very angry and worried.

"We humans also depend on the forest for all sorts of things like water, fruit, herbs, firewood, fish and meat. If the forest is destroyed, we will have to leave this place. The whole village will have to find somewhere else to live," Billy's father said.

"We have to do something," Billy's mother said.

"I know, I know! I know what to do," Billy said excitedly. "We should tell the king. I'm going to go and tell the king what happened to Swimmy and the forest."

"No. The king's castle is too far away. It's days and days away. You're still a small boy, you can't go alone. And we can't leave the farm," Billy's mother said.

"But Mommy...I know where to go. We learnt at school where the king's palace is. I can find my way and I'll be very careful."

"I'll go with him too," Swimmy said.

"I think it's a good idea," Billy's father said. "Billy is a big boy now and should be able to manage. But you have to be very careful and take care of yourself and Swimmy."

"I will Daddy. I'll take very good care of Swimmy."

So Billy got ready to go on this long journey. It was quite an adventure. His mother packed him a bag of food and some clothes.



Swimmy said he could catch fish on the way for food. The next day, Billy and his family got up very early in the morning, just as dawn was breaking. He said goodbye to his parents and set off on his big adventure with Swimmy riding on his bag.

They walked and walked for hours. Once a kind farmer gave them a ride on a cart filled with hay and another time, another

farmer gave them a ride on his donkeys. Billy ate some of the food his mother gave him. Swimmy caught some fish in a stream near the road. They slept near a big rock under a tree that night.

The next morning, they got up early and set off on their journey again. They travelled for two days. Gradually the road became wider and they met more people on it.

They could see the king's palace far away in the distance.



A farmer who saw them, asked Billy where he was going and why he and Swimmy were all alone. Billy explained about the forest. He said that they were going to the palace to tell the king about it.

The farmer said, “We all rely on the forest for lots of things. I will come with you Billy and help you.”

“Oh, thank you very much,” Billy said.

Then three soldiers who were going home also joined them. More and more people who were surprised that a small boy had come with a small otter to see the king, joined Billy and



Swimmy. In a short time, there was a baker, a tinker, a butcher, a cobbler, a bricklayer, a mason, a blacksmith, a carpenter, a fisherman, a potter, a seamstress, a teacher, an artist, a beekeeper, a librarian, a merchant and lots of other people. Billy and Swimmy were amazed at the support they were getting from the people.

They soon reached the big city. The buildings and houses there were very big. There were few trees and the roads were noisy and full of people and animals. Billy asked directions to the king's castle and they walked towards it. The big iron gates at the castle entrance were closed and there were two guards in front of it.

Billy bravely went up to one guard and said politely, "We would like to speak to the king please."

The guard looked in surprise at the little boy who was speaking to him so fearlessly and said, "Why do you want to speak to the king? Who are you and who are all these people with you?"

"My name is Billy and I have something important to tell the king. Could we speak to him please?"

"No! You can't see the king! He sees people only on Mondays to listen to complaints. Today is Friday. Come back on Monday," said the other guard.

"But this is very important and we can't wait till Monday," Billy and all his friends said.

"We are sorry but the king won't see anyone today," the guards said. "Please move along...you are blocking the castle gates."

Billy and Swimmy and their friends were disappointed. They had come all this way to see the king and now they had to wait two more days to see him. They went to a nearby park to think what they could do. Everyone seemed to have different ideas about what they should do now.

Then Swimmy said, "I have an idea. I'm sure this big castle has a big pond inside. Is there a stream that flows into it?"

"Yes...there is a large stream that flows under the castle walls and becomes a big pond inside the castle gardens. But, there is a big iron grille over the stream at the castle wall", one of the soldiers who had been in the castle said.

“Oh! Then we can’t use the stream Swimmy,” Billy said disappointed.

“But Billy, that grille is to keep out humans, not otters,” said Swimmy happily. I’m sure I can easily swim up the stream into the pond. Then I’ll be in the garden. I can find where the king is and tell him about our problem.”

“Swimmy, you have a sprained paw. You can’t swim. You might get injured again when you swim under the grille,” Billy was worried about Swimmy.

“Don’t worry Billy. My paw has got better because I didn’t use it so much. Your mother’s herbal salve has also healed my tail. I’m fine now. I will swim carefully under the grille without getting hurt,” Swimmy told his friend.

“Alright then, if you are certain we’ll follow your plan!” Billy said and everyone became very excited. They started discussing how they should get the message to the king. Billy suggested tying a piece of paper with a message to the king on Swimmy’s neck. The king would then know that there was a big problem and would talk to them.

So Billy wrote a message to the king on a piece of paper, put it in a leather pouch and tied it on Swimmy’s neck with a piece of twine. Then they all waited until it was dark to carry out their plan.

When the sun had set and it was dark, Billy, Swimmy and the three soldiers went to the stream. One soldier said, “I think you should start swimming from here Swimmy. It’s not safe to go too

near the castle wall. We may be seen by the guards and will be arrested.”

“That’s a good idea,” said Swimmy. “See you later Billy... goodbye for now” and Swimmy entered the water with a soft ‘pop’. Billy and the soldiers saw Swimmy swimming swiftly upstream along the stream. Then there was a curve in the stream and they couldn’t see him anymore.

“Let’s go to the park and wait for some message,” said one of the soldiers and they went back to the park and their friends and waited and waited.

Meanwhile, Swimmy had come to the grille in the castle wall. He put his head out of the water and looked around. He couldn’t see any guards nearby, so he quickly swam under the grille and entered the castle grounds. He swam up the stream until he came to the large pond in the gardens. Swimmy got out of the water and shook himself. Then he looked around.



He could see lights in some of the windows in the big castle. There were voices and singing. He could hear some barking as well. He decided to wait until most of the people were asleep before he went inside to find the king. He waited and waited and waited. He saw the castle lights go out one by one and it became quieter. When only a few lights were on in the castle, he slowly got out of the water and ran towards the castle.

He saw a door that was open slightly. He put his head through and saw that it was the large castle kitchen. He quickly went inside and hid behind a sack of flour. He looked around and swiftly went through another door. He was now in a corridor. He ran along the corridor and through another door. There was a long table and several smaller tables. He was in the dining hall. But no one was in the room. Swimmy decided that the king must have gone to bed because it was late now. He decided to go to the next floor and check the rooms.

Swimmy came to a big hall with a staircase. He ran up the stairs and came to a long corridor to his left and another shorter one to his right. He decided to go to the right. There were only two doors along the corridor. The first one was closed and the second was at the end of the corridor and slightly open.

Swimmy slowly put his head around the doorway and looked in. There was a small lamp in the room, giving a little light. It was a large sitting room. There was another open door at the opposite end. He went across the room and looked into the other room. This room also had a small lamp. It was a big bed room with a huge bed. On a chair near the bed, Swimmy saw a crown. "Ah, this must be the king's room," Swimmy thought to himself.

He ran up to the bed and tried to see who was on it. But he was too short. Then he jumped up but still couldn't see who was on it. Finally he climbed on to the bedside table. Then he could see a man sleeping on the bed. The man had a beard and a kind but stern face. "This must be the king," Swimmy thought to himself because he had seen the king's picture in Billy's home.

Swimmy jumped onto the bed and slowly shook the king's shoulder with his paw. The king woke up immediately.

"Who woke me up?" the king asked in an annoyed voice.

"I did," Swimmy said softly.

"What are you?" The king asked surprised. He had never seen an otter before.

"I'm an otter. My name is Swimmy"

The king sat up on the bed and looked carefully at Swimmy. "Why did you come here and wake me up?" the king asked kindly.

"My friend Billy and I came a long way to see you. I have a message from Billy in the pouch around my neck," Swimmy said.

The king removed the pouch and read Billy's message. **"DEAR KING, MY FRIEND SWIMMY AND I HAVE COME A LONG WAY TO SEE YOU. THE FOREST NEAR OUR HOME IS BEING BURNT. BAD MEN ARE CUTTING DOWN THE TREES. ANIMALS ARE DYING. WE NEED YOUR HELP. BILLY AND SWIMMY."**



The king was very surprised. “Who is Billy?” he asked.

“Billy is a little boy, my best friend,” Swimmy said. “We came to ask for your help”.

“Where is he now?”

“He’s in the park with our friends who came with us. He’s waiting to speak to you. But the guards at the gate said that

we can speak to you only on Monday. We can’t wait that long.”

“I see. I’ll get one of the guards to bring your friends to the castle. You must be tired. You can all sleep here and we’ll talk in the morning,” the king said.

“Oh thank you very much king.” Swimmy said happily.

The king sent a guard to the park to bring Billy and his friends to the castle. They got scared when they saw a guard coming. But the guard said that he had a message from the king. Everyone was very happy and excited.

“Swimmy was successful. He has given the message to the king,” Billy said happily.

Everyone went with the guard to the castle. Swimmy ran out of the castle to talk to Billy. He told them about his adventure. Everyone was happy to see Swimmy safe and sound.

Billy, Swimmy and their friends were given a meal. They had never had such good food. Then they were given rooms to sleep in. The next morning, after breakfast, they were called before the king.

The king sat on his throne in the big audience room. On either side of him there were ministers and guards. Billy and the others walked along the long carpet and stood before the king.

The king asked, "Who is Billy?"

Billy stepped forward, "I am, your majesty."

"What did you come all this way to tell me?"

Billy explained the whole story about the destruction of the forest and Swimmy helped him. He finished his story by saying, "Your majesty, my Daddy says we all need the forest. If it is destroyed, then we will also have to find somewhere else to live. That's why all these kind people joined us to come and speak to you. You're the only one who can help us. Please do something quickly."

The king thought for a while and said, "What Billy says is very true. Even people who live in the city need the forest. I will order my soldiers to arrest these men and stop the destruction of the forest."

He called his prime minister, "Prime minister, take some soldiers and go to the forest. Arrest all the men who are responsible. There

must be people who are buying the timber. You must arrest these men as well. I will go first to Billy's village and talk to the villagers. Later I'll come to the area that was destroyed."

The prime minister bowed to the king and asked directions to the area from Billy. He left the throne room. The king thanked all the people who supported Billy and Swimmy. The soldiers and all the others who had come with Billy and Swimmy said goodbye and promised to visit them and left. The king, Billy, Swimmy and some soldiers set off to Billy's village. The king travelled on horseback and Billy also got a ride with a soldier.

They arrived at Billy's village the same evening. Billy's mother and father ran to the village square when they heard that the king had arrived. Everyone was very surprised to see Billy with the king. Billy's parents were happy to see Billy and Swimmy safe and sound. They were also very proud that Billy and Swimmy were able to stop the destruction of the forest.

The king explained what had happened and why he had come. Then he made a proclamation that the forest was not to be destroyed and that the animals should be protected.

He also said, "Billy and Swimmy are an example to all of us. They were brave and were not afraid to fight for what they believe in. Hereafter, I'm making Billy a guardian of the forest. Otter will become the national symbol of our country."



Everyone cheered and clapped. Billy and Swimmy became local heroes. They were always best friends and lived happily ever after!



What is an otter?

Otters are small mammals. They are very shy animals and live in any clean body of fresh water, including lakes, streams, rivers, ponds and marshes. Some otters such as the European otter may also live along the seashore, in salt water, but they need regular access to fresh water to clean their fur. The sea otter is exclusively a marine animal.

The picture on the back cover shows two otters. They have long, slim bodies and relatively short limbs with webbed paws. Most have sharp claws on their paws, and all except the sea otter have long, muscular tails. They are very fast swimmers.

Otters mostly eat fish. They also eat shellfish and frogs. Some otters are expert at opening shellfish and others will feed on available small mammals, amphibians or birds. Otters are very active and playful animals, chasing prey in the water or searching the river beds, lakes or seas. They appear to engage in various behaviour patterns for sheer enjoyment. Different species vary in their social structure. Some live as solitary animals, while others live in groups.

There are 13 species of otter living in the world. In Asia, there are five species, namely European/common otter, small-clawed otter, hairy-nosed otter, smooth-coated otter and the sea otter. The small-clawed otter is the smallest and the sea otter is the largest.

It is very important to protect the otter as it is at the top of aquatic food chain. The otter is highly sensitive to any form of disturbance, pollution and habitat destruction. Because they are so sensitive they act as a warning signal for the health of the environment and this is obviously important for the well-being of humans as well.



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