

THE GIRL WHO OWNED A BEAR

by L. Frank Baum

Mamma had gone down-town to shop. She had asked Nora to look after Jane Gladys, and Nora promised she would. But it was her afternoon for polishing the silver, so she stayed in the pantry and left Jane Gladys to amuse herself alone in the big sitting-room upstairs.

The little girl did not mind being alone, for she was working on her first piece of embroidery--a sofa pillow for papa's birthday present. So she crept into the big bay window and curled herself up on the broad sill while she bent her brown head over her work.

Soon the door opened and closed again, quietly. Jane Gladys thought it was Nora, so she didn't look up until she had taken a couple more stitches on a forget-me-not. Then she raised her eyes and was astonished to find a strange man in the middle of the room, who regarded her earnestly.

He was short and fat, and seemed to be breathing heavily from his climb up the stairs. He held a work silk hat in one hand and underneath his other elbow was tucked a good-sized book. He was dressed in a black suit that looked old and rather shabby, and his head was bald upon the top.

"Excuse me," he said, while the child gazed at him in solemn surprise. "Are you Jane Gladys Brown?"

"Yes, sir," she answered.

"Very good; very good, indeed!" he remarked, with a queer sort of smile. "I've had quite a hunt to find you, but I've succeeded at last."

"How did you get in?" inquired Jane Gladys, with a growing distrust of her visitor.

"That is a secret," he said, mysteriously.

This was enough to put the girl on her guard. She looked at the man and the man looked at her, and both looks were grave and somewhat anxious.

"What do you want?" she asked, straightening herself up with a dignified air.

"Ah!--now we are coming to business," said the man, briskly. "I'm going to be quite frank with you. To begin with, your father has abused me in a most ungentlemanly manner."

Jane Gladys got off the window sill and pointed her small finger at the door.

"Leave this room 'meejitly!" she cried, her voice trembling with indignation. "My papa is the best man in the world. He never 'bused anybody!"

"Allow me to explain, please," said the visitor, without paying any attention to her request to go away. "Your father may be very kind to you, for you are his little girl, you know. But when he's down-town in his office he's inclined to be rather severe, especially on book agents. Now, I called on him the other day and asked him to buy the 'Complete Works of Peter Smith,' and what do you suppose he did?"

She said nothing.

"Why," continued the man, with growing excitement, "he ordered me from his office, and had me put out of the building by the janitor!"

What do you think of such treatment as that from the 'best papa in the world,' eh?"

"I think he was quite right," said Jane Gladys.

"Oh, you do? Well," said the man, "I resolved to be revenged for the insult. So, as your father is big and strong and a dangerous man, I have decided to be revenged upon his little girl."

Jane Gladys shivered.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I'm going to present you with this book," he answered, taking it from under his arm. Then he sat down on the edge of a chair, placed his hat on the rug and drew a fountain pen from his vest pocket.

"I'll write your name in it," said he. "How do you spell Gladys?"

"G-l-a-d-y-s," she replied.

"Thank you. Now this," he continued, rising and handing her the book with a bow, "is my revenge for your father's treatment of me. Perhaps he'll be sorry he didn't buy the 'Complete Works of Peter Smith.' Good-by, my dear."

He walked to the door, gave her another bow, and left the room, and Jane Gladys could see that he was laughing to himself as if very much amused.

When the door had closed behind the queer little man the child sat down in the window again and glanced at the book. It had a red and yellow cover and the word "Thingamajigs" was across the front in big letters.

Then she opened it, curiously, and saw her name written in black letters upon the first white leaf.

"He was a funny little man," she said to herself, thoughtfully.

She turned the next leaf, and saw a big picture of a clown, dressed in green and red and yellow, and having a very white face with three-cornered spots of red on each cheek and over the eyes. While she looked at this the book trembled in her hands, the leaf crackled and creaked and suddenly the clown jumped out of it and stood upon the floor beside her, becoming instantly as big as any ordinary clown.

After stretching his arms and legs and yawning in a rather impolite manner, he gave a silly chuckle and said:

"This is better! You don't know how cramped one gets, standing so long upon a page of flat paper."

Perhaps you can imagine how startled Jane Gladys was, and how she stared at the clown who had just leaped out of the book.

"You didn't expect anything of this sort, did you?" he asked, leering at her in clown fashion. Then he turned around to take a look at the room and Jane Gladys laughed in spite of her astonishment.

"What amuses you?" demanded the clown.

"Why, the back of you is all white!" cried the girl. "You're only a clown in front of you."

"Quite likely," he returned, in an annoyed tone. "The artist made a front view of me. He wasn't expected to make the back of me, for that was against the page of the book."

"But it makes you look so funny!" said Jane Gladys, laughing until her eyes were moist with tears.

The clown looked sulky and sat down upon a chair so she couldn't see his back.

"I'm not the only thing in the book," he remarked, crossly.

This reminded her to turn another page, and she had scarcely noted that it contained the picture of a monkey when the animal sprang from the book with a great crumpling of paper and landed upon the window seat beside her.

"He-he-he-he-he!" chattered the creature, springing to the girl's shoulder and then to the center table. "This is great fun! Now I can be a real monkey instead of a picture of one."

"Real monkeys can't talk," said Jane Gladys, reprovingly.

"How do you know? Have you ever been one yourself?" inquired the animal; and then he laughed loudly, and the clown laughed, too, as if he enjoyed the remark.

The girl was quite bewildered by this time. She thoughtlessly turned another leaf, and before she had time to look twice a gray donkey leaped from the book and stumbled from the window seat to the floor with a great clatter.

"You're clumsy enough, I'm sure!" said the child, indignantly, for the beast had nearly upset her.

"Clumsy! And why not?" demanded the donkey, with angry voice. "If the fool artist had drawn you out of perspective, as he did me, I guess you'd be clumsy yourself."

"What's wrong with you?" asked Jane Gladys.

"My front and rear legs on the left side are nearly six inches too short, that's what's the matter! If that artist didn't know how to draw properly why did he try to make a donkey at all?"

"I don't know," replied the child, seeing an answer was expected.

"I can hardly stand up," grumbled the donkey; "and the least little thing will topple me over."

"Don't mind that," said the monkey, making a spring at the chandelier and swinging from it by his tail until Jane Gladys feared he would knock all the globes off; "the same artist has made my ears as big as that clown's and everyone knows a monkey hasn't any ears to speak of--much less to draw."

"He should be prosecuted," remarked the clown, gloomily. "I haven't any back."

Jane Gladys looked from one to the other with a puzzled expression upon her sweet face, and turned another page of the book.

Swift as a flash there sprang over her shoulder a tawney, spotted leopard, which landed upon the back of a big leather armchair and turned upon the others with a fierce movement.

The monkey climbed to the top of the chandelier and chattered with fright. The donkey tried to run and straightway tipped over on his left side. The clown grew paler than ever, but he sat still in his chair and gave a low whistle of surprise.

The leopard crouched upon the back of the chair, lashed his tail from side to side and glared at all of them, by turns, including Jane Gladys.

"Which of us are you going to attack first?" asked the donkey, trying hard to get upon his feet again.

"I can't attack any of you," snarled the leopard. "The artist made my mouth shut, so I haven't any teeth; and he forgot to make my claws. But I'm a frightful looking creature, nevertheless; am I not?"

"Oh, yes;" said the clown, indifferently. "I suppose you're frightful looking enough. But if you have no teeth nor claws we don't mind your looks at all."

This so annoyed the leopard that he growled horribly, and the monkey laughed at him.

Just then the book slipped from the girl's lap, and as she made a movement to catch it one of the pages near the back opened wide. She caught a glimpse of a fierce grizzly bear looking at her from the page, and quickly threw the book from her. It fell with a crash in the middle of the room, but beside it stood the great grizzly, who had wrenched himself from the page before the book closed.

"Now," cried the leopard from his perch, "you'd better look out for yourselves! You can't laugh at him as you did at me. The bear has both claws and teeth."

"Indeed I have," said the bear, in a low, deep, growling voice. "And I know how to use them, too. If you read in that book you'll find I'm described as a horrible, cruel and remorseless grizzly, whose only business in life is to eat up little girls--shoes, dresses, ribbons and all! And then, the author says, I smack my lips and glory in my wickedness."

"That's awful!" said the donkey, sitting upon his haunches and shaking his head sadly. "What do you suppose possessed the author to make you so hungry for girls? Do you eat animals, also?"

"The author does not mention my eating anything but little girls," replied the bear.

"Very good," remarked the clown, drawing a long breath of relief. "you may begin eating Jane Gladys as soon as you wish. She laughed because I had no back."

"And she laughed because my legs are out of perspective," brayed the donkey.

"But you also deserve to be eaten," screamed the leopard from the back of the leather chair; "for you laughed and poked fun at me because I had no claws nor teeth! Don't you suppose Mr. Grizzly, you could manage to eat a clown, a donkey and a monkey after you finish the girl?"

"Perhaps so, and a leopard into the bargain," growled the bear. "It will depend on how hungry I am. But I must begin on the little girl first, because the author says I prefer girls to anything."

Jane Gladys was much frightened on hearing this conversation, and she began to realize what the man meant when he said he gave her the book to be revenged. Surely papa would be sorry he hadn't bought the "Complete Works of Peter Smith" when he came home and found his little girl eaten up by a grizzly bear--shoes, dress, ribbons and all!

The bear stood up and balanced himself on his rear legs.

"This is the way I look in the book," he said. "Now watch me eat the little girl."

He advanced slowly toward Jane Gladys, and the monkey, the leopard, the donkey and the clown all stood around in a circle and watched the bear with much interest.

But before the grizzly reached her the child had a sudden thought, and cried out:

"Stop! You mustn't eat me. It would be wrong."

"Why?" asked the bear, in surprise.

"Because I own you. You're my private property," she answered.

"I don't see how you make that out," said the bear, in a disappointed tone.

"Why, the book was given to me; my name's on the front leaf. And you belong, by rights, in the book. So you mustn't dare to eat your owner!"

The Grizzly hesitated.

"Can any of you read?" he asked.

"I can," said the clown.

"Then see if she speaks the truth. Is her name really in the book?"

The clown picked it up and looked at the name.

"It is," said he. "'Jane Gladys Brown,' and written quite plainly in big letters."

The bear sighed.

"Then, of course, I can't eat her," he decided. "That author is as disappointing as most authors are."

"But he's not as bad as the artist," exclaimed the donkey, who was still trying to stand up straight.

"The fault lies with yourselves," said Jane Gladys, severely. "Why didn't you stay in the book, where you were put?"

The animals looked at each other in a foolish way, and the clown blushed under his white paint.

"Really--" began the bear, and then he stopped short.

The door bell rang loudly.

"It's mamma!" cried Jane Gladys, springing to her feet. "She's come home at last. Now, you stupid creatures--"

But she was interrupted by them all making a rush for the book. There was a swish and a whirr and a rustling of leaves, and an instant later the book lay upon the floor looking just like any other book, while Jane Gladys' strange companions had all disappeared.

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This story should teach us to think quickly and clearly upon all occasions; for had Jane Gladys not remembered that she owned the bear he probably would have eaten her before the bell rang.