

The Stuffed Alligator

By L. Frank Baum

When mothers are worried they are apt to be cross; and that explains why Mum'r Alligator spoke so sharply to her son Wolly.

"See here! Don't you dare swim into the swift current," she said, fretfully, as Wolly crossed to the end of the old log, which lay half buried in the marsh, and dropped into shallow water. "Keep to the warm pools and swim there as much as you like; but if you go near the river for a single instant I'll—I'll—I'll go to the Red-Eyed One and tell him how bad you are!"

It was a terrible threat. The Red-Eyed One was the mighty magician of the Alligator people; the most wise, the most powerful, the most fearful creature of all the inhabitants of the Swamps. He could not be deceived by ordinary 'gators—the simple mud-wallowers that refused to think as they lay blinking in the sun—and it was known that the Red-Eyed One dealt out sharp punishment for disobedience. At least, this was what mothers told their children, when mothers were worried and cross; and the children were willing to believe anything of the mighty magician who dwelt in the Hidden Cavern.

Wolly Alligator had no thought of being disobedient when he swam away from home and left Dad'n Alligator asleep on a bank of mud and Mum'r Alligator taking her daily sun-bath on her log. Young Alligators are apt to become restless, and aged Alligators love peace and quiet. Moreover, Wolly was hungry.

Dad'n Alligator could be content a week longer on the meal of Spring lamb he had eaten a fortnight before; but Wolly had only been given part of a leg, and that was no satisfaction at all to a young and growing 'gator.

So he started with a firm though secret intention to discover a dinner, for in the stagnant pools of the marsh, where Alligators abounded, it was not likely a dinner would escape the hundreds of vigilant eyes that were watching on every side. Therefore he crossed the pools, crawled over the intervening bank of mud (which was the danger line) and came at last to where the broad river wandered away upon its crooked course.

At the other side of the river were green fields and pasture lands, showing above the embankment. On this side the water of the river blended into the mud-bank and the marsh, with scarce any other distinction to mark its path beyond the steady flow of the current.

Here, at the river's edge, Wolly halted, and looked longingly across. Many dinners wandered on those green banks. Why should his mother forbid him to stalk his prey? How should the Red-Eyed One know if he seized a fat sheep or a calf and returned with the morsel inside him?

It was the hunger that drove him to disobedience; for without stopping to consider either warnings or commands he swam slowly across the river and raised his nose above the edge of the green bank.

What happened at that moment Wolly could never explain clearly. A rope flew through the air and settled around his neck, gripping close to the scales. With a movement quick as a lightning flash he pounded his tail upon the bank and tried to turn; but the rope drew taut and threw him half a length farther upon the grass. Then, quivering, he lay still and darted a glance along the rope. The far end was wound about a tree, and a Man clung to the last fold. A Man! Anger swelled in Wolly's breast. An enemy and a dinner in one—and seemingly very near.

Like the wind was his rush upon the foe; but, alas! he had merely dashed to destruction. The folds of the line about the tree held him close prisoner and the Man was a safe distance away, still calmly holding in his hands the end of the rope.

Wolly was but half grown, yet he struggled for his life with a desperation worthy the Red-Eyed One himself. To be sure it was unavailing; but he always had the satisfaction of knowing he had done his best.

The last that he remembered was lying helpless amid the coils of rope and watching with upturned eyes the flash of a knife. Then his eyes saw blackness; his brain ceased to think; he lay still.

The Man was proud of his conquest. There was now one less Alligator to steal his lambs. He carried the thick, tough skin home to his bungalow and carefully cured it, the head being left on. Then he stuffed both head and body very artistically, and sent to the City for some glass eyes, which he fastened into the head.

After this Wolly lay, in a very life-like attitude, under a bench at the back of the porch; and when friends of the Man came to visit him he showed them his stuffed Alligator with considerable pride.

Mum'r Alligator became worried when Wolly did not return. Dad'n Alligator only thought she was getting fretful again, and blinked one eye after the other without budging from his mud-bank or replying with a single word.

This apathy made Mum'r indignant. She tossed her tail and wriggled about until the muddy water that circled around her log was churned into a foam that showed silver under the moon's rays. For night had come, but no Wolly.

In the morning she could bear the anxiety no longer. So she slipped into the water and made her way through the swamps until she reached a place where a cluster of great rocks broke the flatness of the landscape. Here she paused, made a dive into deep water, and came to the surface within a cavern hollowed out of the centre of the rock.

The cavern was not lighted; but, as Mum'r lay with her chin upon the rocky edge of the pool, she could dimly perceive an immense dark form lying outstretched before her.

The mighty magician was asleep.

Then a red light glowed in the dusk, flooding her with its rays. And now another light flashed beside it. The Red-Eyed One had unclosed his eyelids.

Mum'r was awed in the silence that followed. She felt the terrible gaze full upon her, reading her every thought. She wanted to speak, but could not.

Finally the magician coughed; and the sound was so warning, and at the same time so sympathetic, that Mum'r Alligator knew at once her worst fears were realized.

"Oh, my poor boy! my Wolly!" she moaned, the big tears rolling from her eyes and splashing into the pool.

"I'm sorry," remarked the magician; and he moved slightly his great body, so that the reflected light rippled from scale to scale until it died away at the far tip of his tail.

"What has happened?" implored Mum'r Alligator, mournfully; "tell me—what has happened?"

"The Man has captured your son," said the Red-Eyed One, slowly. "He has taken poor Wolly's skin and head, and has carried them to the house wherein he dwells."

With a wild sob Mum'r sank deep into the pool, swam back to the marsh, and dragged her weary, heart-sick body to the log she called her home.

Dad'n 'Gator opened both eyes at once when he heard the sad story; but he didn't move. Two hours later he remarked:

"Wolly was careless."

It wasn't much comfort to Mum'r; but she didn't expect comfort. Probably Dad'n felt sad and miserable in his own way; but he was old, and he had learned that words cure no ills and mend no breaks.

Afterward Mum'r Alligator went again to the Red-Eyed One, who told her that Wolly had been stuffed and now lay upon the Man's porch, looking as beautiful and lifelike as ever.

That was a great comfort to Mum'r, and she lay many days upon her log and dreamed of Wolly, and longed for him in her motherly way, until one morning a happy thought came to her.

The thought sent her hurrying at a rapid pace to the rocky cavern in which the Red-Eyed One dwelt, where she asked him:

"Are you really a magician?"

"I am," was the reply, while the two eyes glared upon her as if resenting the inquiry.

"Then, can you not restore my Wolly to life?" demanded Mum'r, her voice trembling with eagerness she could not suppress.

"I can," said the Red-Eyed One, calmly.

"And will you—will you?" asked Mum'r, anxiously.

The magician paused. He was thinking. Presently he answered:

"If you will promise that I receive from your family one fat sheep a month, for twelve months to come, and if you dare venture to the Man's house to restore Wolly to life, I will give you a charm that will work the transformation."

"I promise, and I dare!" cried Mum'r Alligator, without hesitation.

"Good!" said the magician. Then he paused again, thoughtfully.

Mum'r was so excited she could scarcely wait for him to continue. But it was several minutes before he said, speaking the words slowly and impressively:

"Under my left claw lies a magic gem which, if placed upon your son Wolly's head, will restore him to life. But if light falls upon this gem its virtue will depart. Therefore you must go at night to the house of the Man, and carry the gem in your mouth, so that even the moon cannot shine upon it."

Mum'r heard this with a shiver of dread; for Alligators never move in the dark if they can avoid it. But the rescue of Wolly had now become the one ambition of her life.

"Give me the magic gem," she said, firmly; "I will make the journey at night that no light may fall upon the talisman and destroy its charm."

"Wait until I close my eyes," returned the magician. "Then feel under my left claw for the gem, and conceal it in your mouth."

The red lights vanished, and the cavern became dark. Mum'r felt for the gem, placed it in her mouth and closed her huge jaws tight around it. Then she sank into the pool, swam from the cavern, and emerged in the Swamp which lay steaming under the hot rays of the afternoon sun.

It filled her with uneasiness to see the glaring sunshine all around her, and to know that if she coughed, or even yawned, Wolly would never be restored to her. But she kept her jaws fast closed and returned slowly to her log.

For a wonder, Dad'n Alligator was awake and stirring.

"Where's that file I sharpen my teeth on?" he demanded, as soon as Mum'r came near. "I want it. I'm hungry again, and I'm going hunting. Where have you put the file I sharpen my teeth on?"

Mum'r Alligator did not reply, of course. She dared not open her mouth while the sun beat down so brilliantly upon the marsh. Dad'n must find the file himself.

But hungry Alligators are cross Alligators. Dad'n stormed and raved and flopped around and wanted his file—which was nothing more than a sliver of rock, if the truth must be told. And Mum'r wouldn't answer a word.

I'm really ashamed to tell of Dad'n's actions. He lashed the shallow water into a sea of mud, and spattered it all over Mum'r's clean scales. Usually she would have lashed Dad'n in return with her sharp tongue; but now she remained meekly quiet, although there was a look in her half-closed eyes that boded future trouble, if her husband hadn't been too much excited to take notice of it.

Dad'n capped the climax of his evil deeds by actually pushing Mum'r off her log and calling her a fish—which is a terrible term of reproach among Alligators—and then floundered away to the river to seek his dinner before it got too dark, caring little in his rage whether his teeth were sharpened or not.

Mum'r's lips curled in a vengeful smile that was half a yard long; but she did not part them. Her jaws were locked over the precious gem, and she intended to keep them locked. Time enough to punish Dad'n when her great task had been accomplished.

She crawled out of the water into which she had been thrust and resumed her place upon the log, patiently waiting for the sun to set.

Toward evening Dad'ri returned. His features wore a contented look, and as he rolled to his place on the bank Mum'r noticed a big lump just below his front paws—where his stomach was located. Dad'n was a mighty hunter; there was no doubt of that. But he had been selfish, and had eaten his dinner alone. Mum'r wouldn't forget.

He looked at her rather uneasily, and tried to make his peace before he went to sleep.

"Perhaps I was a little rough with you this afternoon when I couldn't find my file," he ventured to say; but Mum'r's grim look never relaxed. "Well, well; let bygones be bygones," he continued, carelessly, as he closed his eyes.

Mum'r said nothing. She could wait.

When night came she slipped from the log and began her journey. Over the mud-banks, through the swamps, across the broad river she travelled, and crawled up the steep bank to the meadow. By this time the moon was shining, and she paused to look around her.

A beaten path wound inland from the river. It had been worn by the feet of sheep and men, and Mum'r crawled slowly along it. Beetles chirped in the tall grass, and in the far distance a dog barked; but no other sounds broke the stillness. For the sheep were in the fold and the cows in the barnyard.

Mum'r crept slowly on. Never had Alligator ventured before so near the abode of Man. Her presence in such a place at such an hour was all unexpected.

Now the dim outlines of the bungalow came into view. Its windows were dark, for time had drifted toward midnight. Mum'r drew nearer and nearer, creeping as noiselessly as possible. She came to the steps of the porch, hesitated an instant, and climbed up them.

She could see very well in the dark, and one glance showed her the motionless form of her stuffed darling lying underneath a bench at the back of the porch. She was tempted to cry out, to utter a wail of anguish; but her steadfast courage enabled her to resist the temptation.

Now was the supreme moment of her adventure. She crept forward and noted that Wolly's head was raised so high that there was not room under the bench for her to drop the gem from her mouth upon his head. So with her nose she lifted an end of the bench and thrust it gently

aside. The next moment her jaws rested over her darling's head and the precious talisman slipped from her mouth.

So dark were the shadows at the back of the porch that no ray of light penetrated them, and the magic gem instantly sank into Wolly's head and disappeared. Mum'r had faithfully performed her mission!

She felt the form beside her stir. Then it thrust its nose against her shoulder, and a voice said wonderingly:

"Mum'r dear—is it you?"

Her heart gave a bound of joy; but she realized they were still in danger. Man is a terrible foe; and Man was very near to mother and son, although he lay asleep.

"Hush!" she whispered; "follow me!"

Then she turned and crept down the steps to the path; and Wolly, bewildered and understanding nothing of what had happened since the knife flashed long ago, followed obediently. Mum'r retraced her steps along the path to the river. Often she turned her head to watch Wolly, who crept close after her.

It was a great triumph, this bringing to life a stuffed Alligator by means of magic, and Mum'r had never respected the mighty Red-Eyed One so much as now.

When they reached the river bank and slid into the water the new day was breaking. They swam to the other side and lay half hidden in the marsh to rest. There Wolly told his mother of his capture; and she told him of her visit to the Red-Eyed One, and of her bargain to bring him one fat sheep each month.

"That is a small price, indeed," said the child; "and it shall be my task to pay it. Wait here a moment, Mum'r. I hear a sheep-bell tinkle. Let us take the great magician a fat lamb this very morning, to show our gratitude."

"But think of the danger!" she cried.

"There is no danger," returned Wolly. "Being stuffed, I need fear neither gun nor knife-thrust; for not even Man can kill again the body that has been made to live by the magic of the Red-Eyed One."

That seemed reasonable; so Mum'r let him go back to the meadow.

The first lamb that Wolly brought into the marsh he made his mother eat; and then he captured the fattest sheep that came to the river to drink and bore it in his jaws toward the cavern of the magician. Often, on the way, they had to fight to retain this luscious morsel of food; for dozens of hungry Alligators attempted to rob them. But Wolly, small though he was, soon made himself feared; for nothing seemed to injure his stuffed body, and the snap of his jaws was as powerful as that of a steel trap.

So they made the first payment to the Red-Eyed One, and then returned to their home.

Dad'n lay sunning himself upon his mud-bank in a state of great contentment. Lazily he remembered the ease with which he had subdued Mum'r. Usually she scolded him. Now he had scolded her, and she had not dared utter a word. He was master now! If he had but ventured to push her off her log long ago he would have been master then, undoubtedly. That push had quite conquered her. Dad'n smiled to himself as he recalled her meekness and submission. He had been both brave and wise; he had—

Whack!

His brain suddenly reeled, and his eyes saw a multitude of stars.

Whack!

What had happened? Dad'n wondered. Was it an earthquake? Or had he been struck by a lightning-bolt?

Whack! Whack! Whack!

Dad'n's head was driven flat into the mud-bank. His tail lashed in terror and anguish; but it merely fanned the air or churned the water into a dingy foam. He managed to pull his head from the mud and open his eyes just as the angry sweep of a huge tail, bristling with hard scales, fell once more with terrific force upon his forehead.

He saw stars again; but he also understood. Mum'r had returned. Mum'r was not so meek as he had suspected. Mum'r was being revenged for every slight to her dignity. Mum'r was probably vexed, or—

Whack! Whack!

Dad'n stopped thinking and began to act. Though dazed and half blinded, he rolled and floundered into deep but muddy water, dove to the right, swam to the left, wiggled around in a circle, and came to the surface to breathe only when he had put a good bit of water between himself and his angry wife.

Wolly lay on the log beside his mother, who panted from her exertions.

"Those were splendid blows," he remarked; "and well aimed. I am sure Dad'n is sufficiently punished."

An hour later a black nose rose from the water a few yards away and two black eyes looked pleadingly at the log.

"My head aches," said Dad'n.

"Oh, does it?" inquired Mum'r, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. "Then, who do you suppose, my dear Dad'n, is a fish?"

Dad'n looked longingly at his mud-bank, and decided to purchase peace at any price.

"If there is a fish in this marsh," he announced, sadly, "it is certainly me."

Then he crawled upon the bank and presently forgot his troubles in sleep.

Wolly never grew to be a big Alligator, but he came to be a terror to the farmers across the river. For once every month he captured a fat sheep and carried it to the cave of the Red-Eyed One to keep the promise Mum'r had made the mighty magician. Again and again the Man shot at him, but so tough was his tanned skin that a bullet could seldom penetrate it, and even those that got through did the stuffed Alligator no harm. He was also clever enough to avoid a lasso since his first terrible experience with the rope; so that Wolly soon became famed as a mighty hunter.

One night, about a year after Wolly's rescue from the bungalow, an earthquake shook all that country about the Swamp. Mum'r was thrown from her log and Dad'n was so scared that he slipped from his trembling mud-bank into the water and stayed there all through the night.

But in the morning everything seemed peaceful again; so Wolly swam away at early dawn and captured the last sheep he was obliged to carry to the magician. And when he reached the place where the Red-Eyed One's cave had been, he found nothing left but a heap of jumbled rocks; for the earthquake had not only buried the ancient magician, but had erected above him a monument that to this day is regarded with veneration by every Alligator in the swamp.

So Wolly carried his sheep home to Dad'n and Mum'r; and thereafter he devoted himself to the task of providing a plentiful supply of food for his parents, so that they grew in time to be the biggest and fattest Alligators ever known. Dad'n, who was something of a joker, would often say to his friends and gossips:

"There are three stuffed Alligators in our family. The Man stuffed Wolly, you know; and now Wolly stuffs us!"

