

DANDY

the Highway Lion



STEPHANIE SORRELL

Illustrated by Roxana de Rond

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*For Peter, whose idea this was not
(well, only a little bit)*





1

THE PARK

Moving to London was the worst thing that had ever happened to Hattie and Ben. But then they met the lion.

They had been ejected from the house by the weary housekeeper, Mrs Doncaster, who said she couldn't stand the sight of their miserable faces on such a lovely day, and told them to go to the park and enjoy themselves. They wandered around, glaring at the cheerfully quacking ducks in the pond, and eventually ended up on the only bench that wasn't full of other people having fun.

‘Do you want to play a game?’ said Ben. He didn’t sound like he cared whether or not Hattie agreed. He was kicking his heels against the leg of the bench, scowling at the bright summer sun. He’d had no chance to get himself as messy as he liked to be, and for once he looked quite respectable. His blond hair, which usually stuck out in all directions, was still neatly smoothed down. His face, which was round and freckled, had no streaks of dirt anywhere on it, and there was barely even a crease in his trousers. Hattie looked almost the complete opposite of her brother: tall and rounded where he was short and bony, with dark, uncontrollable curls tied back out of her face.

‘I wish we were at home,’ he said, for perhaps the twentieth time that week, when Hattie didn’t reply.

She sighed and clenched her teeth to stop herself snapping at her brother. It wasn’t *his* fault they’d been forced to live in London. And how could she blame him for voicing the wish she made every single day herself? At first, they had

spent their time dreaming up outlandish plans to get back home to Derbyshire. But they always got stuck, because they couldn't think of anything that would stop their parents dragging them back to London, and the game quickly stopped being fun.

Hattie felt suddenly guilty. Ben was only ten, and she was twelve (and she'd grown so much recently that people often thought she was older). As Mrs Doncaster kept telling her, she was in charge. She was supposed to be entertaining him.

'All right. I Spy? You first,' Hattie said.

It was their fallback whenever there was nothing better to play. They were too old for it really, but Ben was an I Spy genius. Somehow, he always managed to find practically unguessable objects.

She waited while he gazed around for a suitably impossible choice. Knowing Ben, it'd probably be something like the grain of wood in the bench, or the pupils in her eyes. She gave her brother a minute and then turned back to him, beginning to grow impatient.

Ben was wide-eyed, wearing a look of complete astonishment, which vanished instantly when he noticed her attention was on him.

‘Are you ready?’ she asked him.

He hesitated before a grin spread over his face. ‘Yes, I am. I spy with my little eye something beginning with . . . L.’

He looked so infuriatingly pleased with himself that Hattie was immediately sure she would spend the rest of the day guessing his ridiculous L.

She went through a few obvious Ls, like ‘leaves’ and the ‘lodge’, and every time Ben said, ‘No!’ his smile grew smugger and smugger.

Before long, she began to run out of ideas.

‘Er . . .’ She looked around the park again, in the hope that something new would have magically appeared. Nothing had, but she noticed a couple on the next bench looking very cosy. ‘Lovers?’

Ben made a face. ‘No!’

‘Love?’ She wasn’t serious. She just wanted to make him even more disgusted.

‘You can’t *see* love.’

‘How about . . . oh, laces!’ She pointed to Ben’s shoes.

She was sure she was right, but he shook his head. ‘Good idea, but no.’

She groaned. She was starting to regret suggesting to play.

‘Oh, I don’t know. Lynx? Lapdog? Lion?’

‘Yes!’

It took a moment for Hattie to realize what Ben had said. ‘Lion? You *cheater*! You’re supposed to choose things you can see!’

‘Well, I could. When I said it, anyway. It’s gone out of sight now.’

Hattie spent another moment making sense of this. ‘Ben. Are you seriously telling me there’s a lion in this park?’

Ben gave her an extremely withering look from underneath the fringe he refused to cut. ‘*Obviously*. If you don’t believe me, let’s go and find it.’

Ben got up and marched off without waiting for

a reply. Hattie rolled her eyes and pushed herself off the bench. Ben was painfully stubborn; they could spend hours searching for this park-dwelling lion of his if she didn't take his word for it. On the other hand, she didn't want her little brother running away with the idea that it was acceptable to cheat.

Although he was small for his age, and Hattie was tall, he was walking so fast that she struggled to catch up. The park wasn't huge, but occasional copses hid parts of it from view. When she reached him, Ben was standing in the shade of a cluster of trees, pointing to the far end of the park. They had almost reached the road, which was lined by smart town houses. Hattie could hear the rumbling of motor cars and buses, and she felt a pang of homesickness. You never heard traffic at home, unless someone was actually coming up the drive.

'Look,' Ben said, realizing that she wasn't paying attention. 'There's the lion.'

Hattie looked, and sat down involuntarily on a nearby tree stump. In the distance, she saw yellow

fur, a darker mane, definitely a tail. ‘That’s a *lion*.’ Seeing Ben’s expression of outrage, she quickly added, ‘Sorry, I know you told me. It’s just – it’s not every day you see a lion in the middle of London.’

‘Except at the zoo.’

‘Well, yes.’

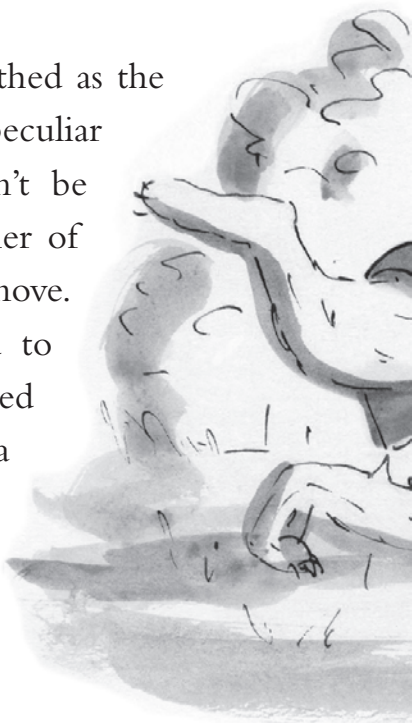
‘Shall we go and say hello?’

‘What?’ Hattie spluttered, but Ben was already running across the grass towards the other end of the park. ‘You don’t just go and *say hello* to a *lion*,’ she muttered to herself. What would her parents say if she allowed him to get eaten by a lion their very first week in London?

She caught up to Ben as he came to a halt a few yards away from the lion, and they both stared in amazement. This was clearly no ordinary lion. He hadn’t noticed them, as he was busy performing what Hattie thought must be *exercises* of some sort. They reminded her of the movements recommended in the magazines her mother sometimes bought. Callisthenics, she thought they were called.

The lion would have looked graceful, except that he was dressed in a black tailcoat, with a long slit at the back for his tail to poke through. Under this, he wore a waistcoat and a wine-red cravat, which was like a tie but wider and bulkier, almost a scarf. What spoilt the effect was that he wore nothing at all below his . . . would you call it a waist on a lion? She noticed a very large and glossy top hat lying a few feet away. She supposed the lion must have removed it to stop it falling off while he did . . . well, whatever it was he was doing.

They watched open-mouthed as the lion stretched himself into peculiar positions that surely couldn't be helped by the tailcoat, neither of them keen to make the first move. Eventually, the lion seemed to finish his routine. He yawned widely, stretched just like a cat, and swept the ends of his tailcoat out of the way before sitting down on the



grass with a satisfied sigh.

‘Nothing like a little exercise first thing in the morning,’ he remarked to nobody in particular, in a surprisingly mellow voice. Hattie had been expecting a growl.

‘First thing in the morning?’ Ben whispered to Hattie, showing her his watch. It was nearly half past eleven.

‘Shhh!’ she hissed, but the lion had already turned his amber eyes to look at them.



Immediately, the lion rose again, picked up his hat and bowed deeply, before settling the hat on top of his mane. 'I must apologize. I did not realize I had company. I wouldn't dream of appearing before strangers bare-headed.'

Disconcerted, the two children glanced at each other. Hattie had no idea what to make of this lion, but at least he seemed to have no interest in eating them.

'What were you doing?' said Ben, while Hattie was saying, 'Are you wearing *half* a suit?'

'I would be delighted to answer your questions, but I feel we ought to be better acquainted first,' said the lion, giving them a smile that revealed a set of very pointy, gleaming white teeth. 'Would you honour me with your names?'

'I'm Ben Davenport, and this is Hattie, my sister,' said Ben, stretching out a hand.

Before Hattie could pull Ben away from the lion's dangerous-looking claws, he had taken Ben's hand in two enormous paws and was shaking it solemnly.

'I could not be more pleased to meet you. I am

Mr Dandy Paws, but I do hope you will call me Dandy.'

He released Ben and took Hattie's hand. She tensed, expecting sharp scratches, but all she felt was the velvety softness of his pads, and the tufts of fur between them.

'Dandy Paws,' Hattie repeated, struggling not to laugh.

'Exactly,' said Dandy. 'I was not given a family name as a young cub, so I chose my own when I entered human society. I have always thought of my paws as one of my best features – see how delicately the claws are trimmed? – so it was only right to name myself for them.'

'I see,' said Hattie, carefully keeping her face straight. 'They are very fine paws indeed.'

Dandy's mouth spread wide in pleasure, revealing his teeth again – his canines were as long as Hattie's little finger. 'I am so pleased you agree, Miss Davenport. To answer your earlier question, I choose my clothing to complement my features. As a lion, I have little *need* for clothing. Indeed, this may be the first time you have

met a lion who bothered to wear any at all! Yet a cravat and tailcoat can be very flattering to a lion's shape, and what is a tailcoat without a waistcoat, I ask you? My lower legs, however, are at their best *au naturel*, as the French would say, especially as I have yet to find a tailor who is willing to include a tail-hole in a pair of trousers.'

Hattie and Ben stared, lost for words, but fortunately Dandy was quite happy to keep the conversation going single-handedly.

'Now you, Master Davenport, were asking about my exercises?'

Ben nodded, suddenly shy.

'Well,' said Dandy, sitting back down on the grass and waving a paw to invite them to do the same, 'they are what are known as callisthenic exercises. Ah, my dear' – he had spotted Hattie's look of recognition – 'I see you are familiar with the term. A kind of exercise designed to promote the best possible health and appearance of the entire body. I would recommend them to anyone.'

'How often do you have to do them?' said

Hattie, sensing that Dandy expected them to be extremely interested in everything he said.

‘Oh, I make a point of performing them every morning,’ said Dandy. ‘I’d be glad to teach you. Callisthenic exercises do wonders for your posture, and of course your figure.’ He nodded at them in turn as if he thought he was being very generous in offering this advice. Hattie felt rather put out at the idea that her figure needed wonders doing for it.

The lion pulled a pocket watch from his waistcoat and consulted it. ‘Excellent, time for breakfast. Master Davenport, Miss Davenport, do excuse me – I am awaited at home. I hope very much that we will see one another again. Good morning to you!’

The lion was on his feet and bowing to them before Hattie could blink in surprise at his sudden departure.

‘Breakfast?’ she said to Ben, checking her watch in disbelief. ‘It’s almost lunchtime!’

Ben was clearly not listening. He was watching Dandy stroll away, towering over everyone he

passed, with a worryingly thoughtful expression. ‘I wonder where he lives,’ he said, getting to his feet.

‘Ben, *no*,’ Hattie replied, as she realized what he had in mind.

‘We’ll just be going for a walk in the same direction as him. What’s wrong with that?’

‘But—’

Ben was already marching off, and Hattie had no choice but to scramble to her feet and follow. One of these days, her brother was going to get them both into real trouble – although, now she thought about it, it was hard to imagine worse trouble than following a lion home without his permission.