

Chapter 1

Three Spotted Little Cubs

One sultry morning in January, far in the interior of Africa, Leo the Lion and his two Weeny Sisters blinked at the Burning Sun as it peeped over the edge of the hot, dry plain known as Broad Plain and searched out the Dense Jungle Thicket which was their home. They blinked because this was the first time they had seen the Burning Sun, and their eyes were not yet strong. If you could have seen Leo the Lion then, when he was not yet a day old, it would have been hard for you to believe that someday he would be a great, big growly lion, known far and wide as the King of Beasts.

Now it may seem strange to you that the eyes of the Weeny Lion Cubs were open so soon, since the eyes of their furry little cousins, the cat kittens, do not open for several days after they are born;-but baby lions are born with their eyes open. You may also wonder how a morning in January could be sultry, but, you see, Leo the Lion's home was almost at the equator, and there the Burning Sun shines almost straight down with terrific heat many, many days during the year. And when the rays are not shining straight down, they are not far from it.

Mrs. Lion had looked for days and days, hoping to find a Rocky Cave Den that would be cool and shady when the Burning Sun was high overhead. At last she found one and peeped in, and what do you suppose she saw? There lay a Mother Lion nursing her five Spotted Little Cubs, or maybe there were six. Mrs. Lion did not wait to see how many there were, for the Mother Lion growled fiercely. So Mrs. Lion backed away and went on with her home hunting.

At last Mrs. Lion crawled back into a Dense Jungle Thicket, and there she scratched away the earth and made a Hidden Lair, where Leo and his two Weeny Sisters were born. You may be sure it did not take the Burning Sun long to search out the Hidden Lair in the Dense Jungle Thicket.

Out on Broad Plain there sounded a mighty roar. "I hear your father telling the Jungle Folk that he is returning home with a full and satisfied stomach," said Mrs. Lion to her three Spotted Little Cubs. But they only pressed their noses deeper into her tawny coat, trying to shield their eyes from the bright light while they enjoyed their first breakfast.

In a little while Mrs. Lion saw Mr. Lion enter a Thorn Thicket that was not far away. She knew that he was looking for a quiet spot where he could sleep during the long, hot day. But she also knew that he would keep one eye open for Terror the Hunter and for Black Hunter, and that made her feel safer. For Terror the Hunter and Black Hunter were the only Lurking Enemies that Mrs. Lion feared. They were the only ones who were powerful enough to harm the lions.

Mrs. Lion lay in the shade of Dense Jungle Thicket during the long, hot day, keeping watch over her three Spotted Little Cubs. But when the Burning Sun made his last nod and bowed out of sight in the Glowing West, Mrs. Lion tucked in her babies and crept forth from the Hidden Lair.

"I'm so hungry," said Mrs. Lion to herself, as she stretched her long, lanky body. "I believe I'll go over toward Big Water Hole and see if I can catch a juicy zebra or hartebeest for lunch when they come for a drink."

Many of the water holes were dry, so the thirsty animals of Broad Plain visited Big Water Hole every night. Big Water Hole was always the last one to dry up.

Every night when the long shadows were racing each other across Broad Plain, Mrs. Lion would steal forth to hunt, leaving Leo and his Weeny Sisters alone in the Hidden Lair. Sometimes she would not return until the second morning, because when the water holes became dry many of the Wild Animals left Broad Plain in search of water. Then Mrs. Lion found it more difficult to catch anything.

Of course Leo and his Weeny Sisters became very hungry while their Loving Mother was away, but they never made a cry that would reveal their Hidden Lair. They amused themselves by playing Roll and Tumble, Sneak and Pounce, and other games. Sometimes, when a bird or a butterfly came near, they played the game of Practice Hunt. They really were quite clumsy at first. They would tumble over almost every little stick and stem that was in their way, and they would often run smack into each other if two of them happened to decide to stalk the same butterfly or bird. Then there would be a short battle, which usually ended in a game of Roll and Tumble. Almost anything was welcome that helped to pass the time while their Loving Mother was away on her long hunts.

At last even Big Water Hole dried up. Then it was harder each night for Mrs. Lion to catch something to eat, although Mr. Lion did

his best to help. Besides, the lions had to travel a long way to find water to drink when there was not enough warm blood to satisfy their thirst.

It is mysterious how the Wild Animals can find even a tiny Little Water Hole in the midst of a great barren land, but they can. Some unseen force seems to guide them straight to it for miles on end. If Fearful the Man were in the same circumstances, doubtless he would wander around blindly until he died of thirst.

One evening when the Spotted Little Cubs were no larger than half-grown pups, Mrs. Lion decided to forsake the Hidden Lair and find a new home.

“Let’s move to Grassy Valley,” she said to Mr. Lion when they were ready to leave for the night’s hunt.

“I think that is a very good suggestion,” agreed Mr. Lion. “Most of our neighbors have left Broad Plain already.”

“There is always good hunting in Grassy Valley,” continued Mrs. Lion, “for that is where many of the Wild Animals go when there is no water here on Broad Plain.”

You see, in Grassy Valley was Lazy River, which wound back and forth as if it were in no hurry at all to get where it was going. Although Lazy River was not wide during the hot, dry season, still almost always there were quiet pools left after all of the water holes on sunbaked Broad Plain were dry.

So it was that Mr. and Mrs. Lion and the three Spotted Little Cubs left their Hidden Lair in the Dense Jungle Thicket when dusk came stealing across Broad Plain and started out to find a new hunting ground in Grassy Valley.

Now, the three Spotted Little Cubs could not walk fast, so Mr. Lion had time to hunt along the way. Each morning as the Burning Sun peeped over a distant mountain to start another day, the lion family would seek the shade of an old, old baobab tree, or they would spend the sultry hours under an almost leafless thorn tree. They did not travel during the day, for the hot earth was not comfortable to their feet, and the Burning Sun hurt their eyes.

So it happened that after almost a week of slow night traveling, they came to Grassy Valley. There in Rocky Cliff, far back from Lazy River, they found a Sheltering Cave, and there they made their new home.