

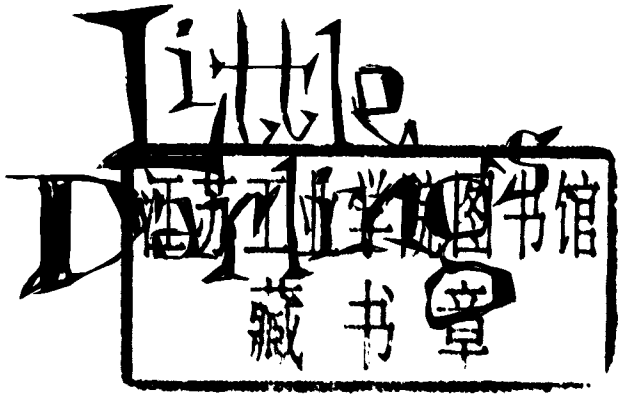


Little Darlings

SAM LLEWELLYN

A very good book about very bad children.





Sam Llewellyn

Illustrated by David Roberts



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Disclaimer: No resemblance is intended between characters or uniforms in this book and those of individual nannies or their agencies, alive, dead or only sleeping.

www.samllewellyn.com

*For dear Auriol, Fan, Connie
and nannies everywhere*

Dramatis Personae

Little Darlings

Meet the family. And some other people.

Daisy Darling

Age: 12½

Likes: clothes, sticky situations

Dislikes: nannies, idiots

Cassian Darling

Age: Roughly 11⁵/₁₆

Likes: machinery, explosions

Dislikes: pink things, flowers, washing

Primrose Darling

Age: Just 10

Likes: cooking, sometimes with little-known poisons

Looks: pinkish, and absolutely sweet

Actually: very dangerous

Papa Darling

Occupation: international business executive

Skills: deploying effective management strategies in the domestic sphere

I beg your pardon? Sorry. Bossing people around

Mrs Darling II

Age: Has been 26 for the last 20 years

Likes: lovely things, e.g. jewellery and Caribbean holidays

Dislikes: dirty, smelly, messy things, e.g. children

The Captain

Age: ageless

Occupation: ship's captain

Appearance: effortless glamour

Top secret fact: you don't think I'm going to tell you, do you? Read the book!

Nanny Pete

Occupation: nanny, burglar

Hobbies: Violence, being kind to children

Drives: a big black Jag

Nosey Clanger

Occupation: pygmy burglar

Hobby: interfering

Appearance: tiny, tattooed, toofless



In the splendid front hall of Number One, Avenue Marshal Posh, Nanny Dodgson unbuttoned the starched cuffs of her uniform blouse and rolled up her sleeves.

From the first landing of the great oval staircase came the whine of a hairdryer. Signor Tesiwesi, Mrs Darling's award-winning hairdresser, was tonging away at Mrs Darling's sticky blonde beehive. As usual, Papa and Mrs Darling were going Out to Dinner.

From a huge doorway off the marble-floored hall came the bark and grunt of Papa Darling, President and Chairman of Darling Gigantic, plc, giving instructions for the building of another office block on another nature reserve.

From upstairs on the nursery floor, where the little Darlings were held captive, came a deep, deep silence.

Nanny Dodgson finished her sleeve-rolling with the neat tuck she had learned at the Royal and Ancient Academy of Nannies. Her chin was square. Her eyes gleamed calmly beneath the brim of her brown bowler hat. But under the snow-white starch of her apron a flock of butterflies swooped and trembled. It was quiet. It was too quiet. Nanny Dodgson did not like it. She did not like it at all.

But this was what she had been trained for.

Taking a deep breath, she placed one shining brogue on the first of the stairs and started to climb, muttering under her breath comforting words: *'Children should be seen and not heard, the Devil finds work for idle hands, mind your Ps and Qs, Patience is a virtue, virtue is a grace, Grace is a little girl who wouldn't wash her —'*

‘Nanny,’ said a thin, refined voice. Nanny Dodgson realized that her Good Thoughts had got her as far as the first landing. She stood smiling nicely, hands folded, waiting for orders. ‘Yes, Mrs Darling?’

‘We’ll be out tonight,’ trilled Mrs Darling, Signor Tesiwesi tunnelling away in her hair. ‘Will you be all right with the children?’

‘Sottinly, madam, lovely little people.’

Mrs Darling’s lipsticky smile froze a little. It was such a trial, when one was simply rushed off one’s feet with dinner parties, and of course poor Colin had to do business at all hours and sometimes in the Bahamas. People really had no idea of the *stress* involved in bringing up children, particularly someone else’s . . .

Which reminded her of something she had been meaning to ask for days. ‘Nanny,’ she said, ‘how old would you say they are now?’

‘Who, madam?’

‘The children.’

‘Daisy the eldest –’

‘I always did say she was the eldest,’ said Mrs Darling, nodding. She prided herself on being in touch.

'*Porca miseria*, keepa still da head,' hissed Signor Tesiwesi.

'— is twelve and a half on Tuesday, naughty lumpkin,' said Nanny Dodgson. 'Cassian is eleven and a quarter on Wednesday next, the wee caution.'

'We'll be at Lady Mortdarthur's,' said Mrs Darling. 'They've been in Mustique, you know.'

'Cassian is the mechanical type,' said Nanny Dodgson, sniffing. 'And Primrose is ten, lovaduckles ickle. Her birthday was two weeks ago. You were at the Teagardens'—'

'No, the de Barpas', said Mrs Darling. 'Such flowers! And tell me, are the children at home?'

'Yes, madam.'

'How lovely. Oh, I must dash.'

'Not before is feenish the head,' said Signor Tesiwesi.

Nanny Dodgson trudged on towards the silence upstairs.

If she had not been a nanny, she could have sworn that she smelt smoke.

But nannies never swear.

Three children sat in front of the nursery fire. The mantelpiece was made of Italian marble. The coal

in the fireplace came from the finest seam in the country. The fork on which they were toasting a neatly trussed city pigeon was made of gold and platinum.

The walls were covered with pictures of sweet children by Renoir, and teeny dolls' clothes in gilt frames, each with a label: Yves Saint Laurent, Hardy Amies, Balenciaga. Among these sweet works of art were polished mahogany shields bearing the heads of nursery mice, trapped by Cassian after complaints from Daisy, and stuffed by Primrose. Among the little shields was a bigger shield, bearing a roundish, brownish object, made of threadbare plush. The brass plate under it read, 'THE ROYAL EDWARD – PART'. Under the plate, a bad child (there was no other kind in the nursery) had carved in neat capital letters: 'BEAR'S BUM'. And indeed, dear reader, a bear's bum it was; the bum of the rarest, most priceless, most squabbled-over bear in the world.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. One thing at a time. Are you sitting comfortably?

Well.

High on the nursery wall, a tiny bell tinkled.

'Here she comes,' said Daisy. Daisy had freckles,

thoughtful eyes of acid green, and splendid blood-red fingernails, which she was drying in the heat of the fire.

‘Come on, Nanny, make my day,’ said Primrose out of the side of her mouth. Primrose had straight blonde hair, an Alice band, and mild blue eyes which were squinting at the faintly sizzling pigeon. Primrose was a keen and skilful cook.

‘Engaging circuits one and two,’ said Cassian, a stocky boy with black hair that grew low over an oil-stained forehead. It made him look as if he was frowning with concentration, which in fact he usually was. ‘Ready? Three, two, one. Go.’

How very shocking! thought Nanny Dodgson, when she saw the toy car on the landing. She had been in the Darling household eighteen days precisely, and she was not yet having the effect she could have wished for. The parents were all a nanny could desire, of course – no interference there. A papa who was a busy man whose time was not his own. A mummy who was, well, not the actual mummy. More like the papa’s secretary, who had spent more time with the papa than the mummy, until the mummy had been sent away and the secretary

mummy had come instead. And, of course, the Mrs Secretary mummy knew what was best for the children, namely a nanny, strict but fair.

Ooh yes, thought Nanny Dodgson, with the pea-sized brain in the 30-cm-thick skull under the reinforced brown bowler. This was just about a perfect billet. No interference here.

Though the children were difficult, no question. For instance, thought Nanny, the toy car on the top stair. What nicely brought up child would leave a toy lying about after Nanny had told it to put its things away? Really, it was too much!

Nanny stooped to pick up the car, wheezing slightly. She was a stout, busty, solid woman, an excellent shape for a nanny, but not so good for climbing stairs.

Perhaps that is why she did not see the wires that ran from the toy car, under the Turkey carpet and through a hole hidden by the elaborate carving on the nursery door.

Nanny's fingers closed on the car. Two hundred and forty volts of electricity shot through her body. Her brown bowler whizzed off her head and lodged in the ceiling. Her iron-grey hair stood clean on end, and she fizzed like a bottle of Papa Darling's

Bollinger, which is, of course, a kind of champagne, astonishingly fizzy and amazingly expensive.

The car dropped from her smoking fingers. She put out her hand for the nursery door-handle. Then, remembering what had happened last time she had touched something made of metal in this house, she changed her mind. Crying, 'I am coming in, wicked children!' she charged the door with her shoulder.

Reader, you may say that nannies do not charge doors like rugby forwards. Reader, you are wrong, and on this fateful evening Daisy knew better than you. 'Now,' she murmured, blowing on a blood-red nail.

Cassian opened the door. 'Good evening, Nana,' chorused the children politely.

And in came Nanny Dodgson, sideways, at forty miles an hour. She bounced off the back of the nursery sofa, was flung sharp right, and hurtled towards the door of the nursery bathroom, which Primrose opened for her.

Nanny Dodgson now seemed to be skating. She had one thought, and it was this. She could definitely smell burning. Then the time for thinking was over, because the world had turned yellow.

Yellow?

The Darling children stood in the bathroom doorway. They nodded with quiet satisfaction as Nanny Dodgson's thick brown brogues shot her across the well-soaped floor towards the bath. They shook hands gravely as she tripped and crashed into the tub, throwing up a mighty sheet of custard.

Custard?

The Darling children knew what they liked, and it was not custard, particularly when burnt. It had been one of the first things they had told Nanny Dodgson. So for the next fortnight, Nanny Dodgson had fed them burnt custard for breakfast, lunch, tea and supper, not letting them leave the table till they had eaten it All Up.

'Do you think she'll drown?' said Daisy, who was interested in consequences.

'We'll see,' said Cassian, using a phrase much employed by Darling nannies (there had been eighteen of them, so far).

'She'll boil before she drowns,' said Primrose, who had been responsible for lighting the small fire of logs smouldering underneath the bath. 'Oops! Scatter!'

For Nanny Dodgson was rising in the bath, swathed in a daffodil veil of custard. She made a

bubbling noise, in which was dimly audible a drizzle of nanny talk: 'Never in all my born days . . . your poor parents . . . it will never do . . . go to bed without your suppers.' The custard mountain stepped out of the bath and blobbed yellowly out of the door.

'Phase three,' said Cassian, taking up the slack on a small winch.

Nanny Dodgson squelched towards the top of the stairs. She was seeing red, mixed with yellow.

What she was not seeing were trip-wires.

Her brogue caught Cassian's ingenious contrivance. She plummeted down the stairs like a custard Catherine wheel.

Mrs Darling put the finishing touches to her forehead polish, fluffed up the tulle flounces of her bodice, and blew herself a sticky scarlet kiss in the huge gilt mirror. Lady Mortdathur would be green about her hair. Signor Tesiwesi had done such a divine job –

But what was all this noise?

She stepped out on to the landing. Sixteen stone of Dodgson knocked her flat. Tangled together, Mrs Darling and Nanny descended to the hall like a bulk

delivery of custard. They lay under the chandelier, moaning.

Papa Darling stepped out of his study. 'Are we in a total preparedness situation, my dear?' he said.

'My dress!' cried Mrs Darling. 'My jewels! My hair!'

'My impression is that your appearance is highly acceptable,' said Papa Darling, brushing feebly at a splash of custard. He looked at his watch and frowned. 'We are in a negative punctuality situation.'

'Brute!' cried Mrs Darling.

Papa Darling helped her up. He knew he had said the wrong thing, and he was going to take it out on someone. He turned his eye on Nanny Dodgson, moaning, electrocuted, custard-soaked, concussed. 'You,' he said. 'You are to be outwardly redeployed as part of an *ad hoc* child-care staff downsizing.'

'Pardon?' bubbled Nanny Dodgson.

'You're fired.'

'Nooo!' cried Mrs Darling. 'You don't know what you're doing! You didn't hear what the agency said last time. She's our last hope. They'll never -'

'Hush, little one,' said Papa Darling, using the exact masterful tone he had used to summon Mrs Darling from the typing pool that marvellous