



## 5

### DARK IS FASCINATING

Plop, having slept nearly all day, was very lively that evening – very lively and very hungry. He kept wobbling along the branch to where his father was roosting to see if by chance he were awake and ready to go hunting.

Mr Barn Owl was drawn up tall and still. He seemed hardly to be breathing. Plop stretched up on tiptoe and tried to see into his father's face.

What a strong, curved beak he had.

'Daddy, are you awake?' he said loudly. 'I'm hungry.'

Mr Barn Owl did not open his eyes, but the beak moved.

'Go away!' it said. 'I'm asleep.'

Plop went away obediently – and then realised something and went back again. 'Daddy! You can't be asleep. You spoke – I heard you.'

'You must have imagined it,' said his father, still not opening his eyes.

'You spoke,' said Plop. 'You're awake, so you can go hunting.' He butted his father's tummy with his head. 'Come on! It's getting-up time!'

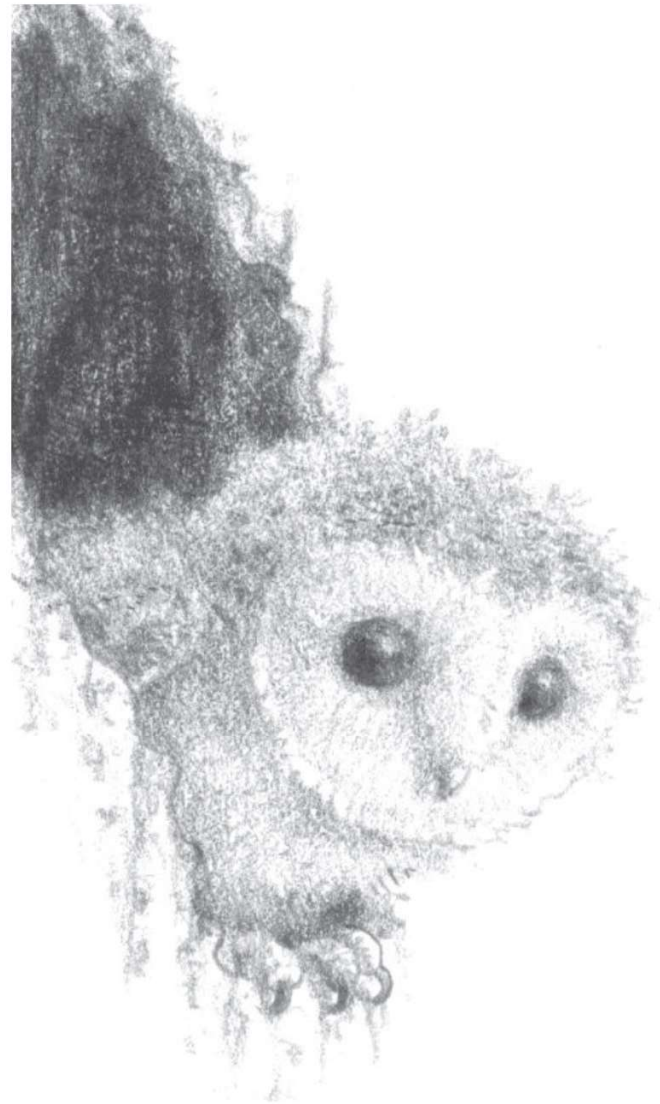
Mr Barn Owl sighed and stretched. 'All right, all right, you horrible owlet. What time is it?' He looked up at the sky. 'Suffering bats! It isn't even dark yet! I could have had another half hour.' He glared at Plop. 'Dash it, I'm going to have another half hour. I will not be bullied by an addled little – little DAY BIRD. Go away! You may wake me when it is dark, and not before, d'you understand?' He suddenly leaned forward until his huge beak was level with Plop's own little carpet tack. Plop could

see two of himself reflected in his father's eyes.

'Er – yes, Daddy,' he said, backing away hurriedly.

'Good,' said his father, drawing himself up to sleep again. 'Good day.'

Plop went back to the nest-hole to complain to his mother. A sleepy Mrs Barn Owl listened sympathetically.



‘Well, dear, I should go and find out some more about the world if I were you,’ she said. ‘Look! There’s a young lady down there. Why don’t you go and talk to her?’

Plop peered down through the leaves.

Standing a little way from the tree was someone wearing shiny black boots, a bright red fur coat with a matching hat, and what looked like a white beard.

‘That’s not a young lady!’ shrieked Plop. ‘That’s Father Christmas!’

And he fell off his branch in such a hurry that he forgot either to shut his eyes *or* to take a deep breath.

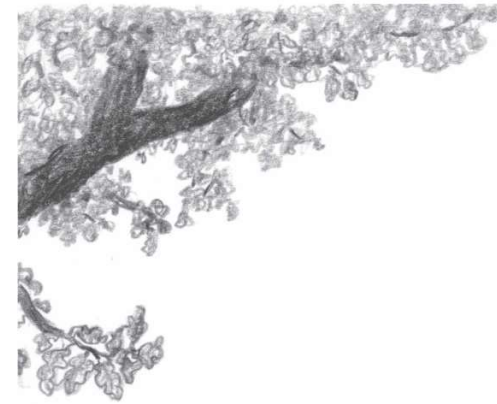
He landed quite well, considering, but lost his balance at the last moment and toppled forward on to his face.

A gentle hand picked him up and set him right way up again.

‘Oh, you poor darling,’ said a sweet young voice. ‘Are you all right?’

Plop looked up quickly. That voice didn’t sound right.

It wasn’t a white beard – it was long blonde hair.





‘You’re not Father Christmas at all!’ he said crossly. ‘And I came down *especially*.’

‘I’m terribly sorry,’ said the young lady.

‘And I’m not a darling. I’m a barn owl.’

‘I tell you what,’ the Father Christmas Lady said. ‘May I draw a picture of you in my nature sketch book? I haven’t got a barn owl in it.’

‘Me?’ said Plop. ‘You mean *really* me?’

‘Yes, please. Perhaps you could pose on that low branch for me.’

Plop fluttered up to the branch and stood stiffly to attention. The Father Christmas Lady sat on a log and began to draw.

‘I always carry my sketch book about with me in case I see something interesting,’ she said.

The interesting barn owl drew himself up proudly like a soldier in a sentry box.

But not for long. The young lady looked up from her drawing to find that her barn owl had completely disappeared.

‘Can I see?’ said a small voice down by her boot. Plop was jiggling up and down trying to see what was on the pad.

‘There’s not much to see, yet,’ she said, ‘but all

right – you can look.’

Plop looked. ‘I’m not bald like that!’ he said indignantly.

‘I haven’t had time to get you properly dressed,’ said the young lady.

‘And you’ve only given me one leg.’

‘I’m afraid a bald, one-legged barn owl is all there’s going to be unless you keep still.’

Plop really tried very hard after that, and he only got down three or four times to see how she was getting on.

He could hardly believe his eyes when it was finished. ‘Is that really me?’ he said. ‘I look just like Daddy – well, almost.’

‘Yes, that’s really you,’ she said. ‘I keep one end of the book for animals and birds that come out in the daytime and the other end for night creatures. I’ve put you with them, of course.’

‘Oh,’ said Plop. ‘Er – of course.’

‘All the most interesting ones are your end,’ the young lady went on. ‘I think DARK IS FASCINATING.’

‘I – er – tell me about it,’ said Plop. (Well, it was too late now to tell her that she had got him at the

wrong end of the book!)

‘Hop up then,’ said the young lady, holding out a finger and taking Plop on to her lap, ‘and I’ll show you what good company you are in. Look – here are some badgers.’

Plop looked at the big black and white animals with stripes down their noses. ‘Funny faces they’ve got.’

‘That’s so they don’t bump into each other in the dark,’ explained the young lady. ‘They can’t see very well.’

She turned over the page. ‘Ah! Now I think these are the most fascinating night creatures of all – bats.’

‘You’ve got it the wrong way up,’ said Plop.

The Father Christmas Lady laughed.

‘No, I haven’t. That’s how bats like to be when they’re not fluttering about – hanging upside down by their feet.’

‘Go on!’ said Plop.

‘Yes, really. And do you know, if you were a baby bat your mother would take you with her wherever she went, clinging to her fur. You’d get lots of rides.’

‘Oh, I’d like that,’ Plop said.

‘Yes, but when you got too big to be carried, do you know what your mother would do? She’d hang you up before she went out!’

‘Hang me up?’ said Plop. ‘Upside down?’

‘That’s right. Now, let’s see what else we can find.’ She turned a few pages. ‘Yes, here we are – oh!’

Plop was not with her.

He was rocking backwards and forwards on the low branch like one of those little wobbly men that you push. Every now and then he went a bit too far and had to waggle his wings to keep his balance.

‘What are you doing?’ asked the young lady.

‘I’m trying to be a bat,’ said Plop, ‘but what I don’t understand is how they begin. I can’t *get* upside down.’

‘Perhaps it would be easier to be a hedgehog,’ said the young lady. ‘When they’re frightened they roll themselves into a ball, look – here’s a picture of one.’

Plop hopped back on to her knee and inspected the hedgehog.

‘His feathers could do with a bit of fluffing up,’ he said.

‘Those aren’t feathers – they’re prickles. Very



useful they are, too. A hedgehog can jump off quite a high fence without hurting himself because he makes himself into a prickly ball and just bounces.'

'Very useful,' said Plop. 'I wish I had prickles.' He jumped off her lap and tried to roll himself into a ball.

It was very difficult. 'I don't seem to have enough bends,' he said.

Suddenly he stopped rolling about and stayed still, listening. Then he rushed back to the young lady's lap and tried to bury himself in her coat.

'What's the matter?' she said.



'THERE'S A FUNNY NOISE,' he said. 'OVER THERE.'

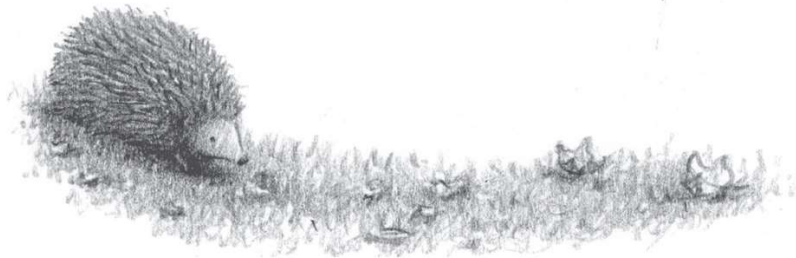
The young lady listened. There was a busy, rustling sound coming from the dry leaves under the big tree.

'Why, I do believe it's a hedgehog!' she said. 'Yes, here he is. Look!'

Plop peeped cautiously over the edge of her lap. A

tiny pointed snout pushed its way through the leaves, and then a small round creature scuttled across the ground in front of them.

‘They never bother to move about quietly,’ the young lady whispered, ‘because they know nobody would want to eat anything so prickly.’



‘Is he sure?’ said Plop. ‘I’m so hungry I could eat anything!’

The hedgehog stopped dead and rolled himself into a tight little ball.

‘He must have heard you,’ the young lady said reproachfully. ‘What a thing to say.’

‘Well, it’s true,’ Plop said. ‘I’m starving.’

‘Oh, of course! You’ll be going hunting with your parents now that it’s getting dark, won’t you? I was forgetting you’re a night bird.’

The night bird looked down at his toes.

‘Well, I won’t keep you,’ she went on, ‘except – would you mind doing something for me before you go? I *would* like to hear you screech.’

Plop didn’t mind at all. He stuck out his chest and gave her the most enormous ‘EEEEEEEEK!’ he could possibly manage.



‘Gorgeous!’ said the young lady.

Plop bobbed his funny little bow. Then he took off and circled round, ‘eeking’ for all he was worth. The young lady waved, and then with one final

‘eeeeek!’ of farewell, Plop flew up to the landing branch.

‘Well?’ said his mother.

‘The Father Christmas Lady – you were right, it was a lady – says DARK IS FASCINATING.’

‘And what do you think, Plop?’

‘I still do not like it AT ALL. But what do you think? The lady drew a picture of me.’

‘Well, that’s very special, isn’t it? Nobody has ever put me in a picture.’

‘*And* she says my screech is gorgeous.’

‘She does, does she? I wondered what all that noise was about.’

‘Where’s Daddy?’

‘Out hunting.’

‘Oh, jolly good. I could eat a hedgehog!’

‘I wouldn’t recommend it,’ said his mother.

**Task – To write a summary of this chapter.**

Remember – a summary pulls out the **most important things that have happened**.