



6

DARK IS WONDERFUL

‘That was nice,’ said Plop when he had gulped down what his father had brought. ‘What was it?’

‘A shrew,’ said his father.

‘I like shrew,’ said Plop. ‘What’s next?’

‘A short pause,’ said Mrs Barn Owl. ‘Let your poor daddy get his breath back.’

‘All right,’ said Plop, ‘but do hurry up, Daddy.’

Shrews are nice, but they’re not very big, are they? This one feels very lonely all by itself at the bottom of my tummy. It needs company.’

‘I don’t believe there is a bottom to your tummy,’ said his father. ‘No matter how much I put into it, it is never full. Oh well, I suppose I had better go and hunt for something else to cast into the bottomless pit.’

‘That’s what fathers are for,’ said Plop. ‘Wouldn’t you like to go hunting, too, Mummy? It would be a nice change for you.’

‘Thank you very much,’ said Mrs Barn Owl. ‘What you really mean is that you won’t have to wait so long between courses! But I will certainly go if you don’t mind being left.’

‘Why don’t you come with us?’ said his father. ‘Then you wouldn’t have to wait at all.’

Plop looked round at the creeping darkness. ‘Er – no, thank you, Daddy,’ he said. ‘I have some more remembering to do.’

‘Righto,’ said Mr Barn Owl. ‘Ready, dear?’

Plop’s parents took off together side by side, their great white wings almost touching. Plop sat outside the nest-hole and watched them drift away into the

darkness until they melted into each other and then disappeared altogether. It took quite a long time, because the stars were coming out and Plop could see a long way by their light with his owl's eyes.

He remembered what his mother had said about dark never being black. It certainly was not black tonight. It was more of a misty grey, and the sky was pricked all over with tiny stars.

'Drat!' said a voice from somewhere below Plop.



Plop started and peered down through the leaves. There was a man with some sort of contraption set up in front of him, standing there scowling up at the cloud which had hidden the moon. What was he doing?

Plop shut his eyes, took a deep breath, and fell off

his branch.

He shot through the air like a white streak and landed with a soft bump.

'Heavens!' cried the man. 'A shooting star!'

'Actually, I'm a barn owl,' said the shooting star. 'What's that thing you've got there?'

'A telescope,' said the man. 'A barn owl, did you say? Well, well. I thought you were a meteor. How do you do?'

'How do I do what?' asked Plop.

'Oh – you know what I mean. How are you?'

'Hungry,' said Plop. 'I thought you said I was a shooting star, not a meteor.'

'A meteor is a shooting star.'

'Oh,' said Plop. 'What is the television for?'

'Telescope. For looking at things like the stars and planets.'

'Ooh! Can I have a look, please?'

'Of course,' said the man, 'but it's not a very good night for it, I'm afraid. Too cloudy.'

'I don't like the dark very much,' said Plop.

'Really?' said the man. 'How very odd. You must miss such a lot. DARK IS WONDERFUL.'

'Tell me,' said Plop. 'Please.'

‘I’ll do better than that – I’ll show you,’ the man said. ‘Come and put your eye – no, no! *This* end!’

Plop had jumped up, scuttled along the telescope, and was now peering backwards between his feet into the wrong end.

‘I can’t see anything,’ he said.

‘You surprise me,’ said the man. ‘Try this end.’

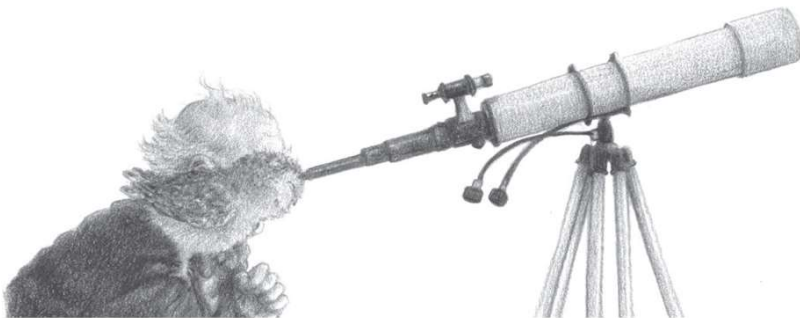
Plop wobbled back along the telescope and the man supported him on his wrist so that his eye was level with the eye-piece.

‘Now can you see anything?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Plop. ‘It makes everything come nearer, doesn’t it? I can see a bright, bright star. That must be very near.’

‘Yes – just fifty-four million, million miles away, that’s all.’

‘Million, million –!’ gasped Plop.



‘Yes, that’s Sirius, the Dog Star. You’re quite right – it is one of the nearest.’ Obviously million millions were nothing to the man with a telescope.

‘Why is it called the Dog Star?’ asked Plop.

‘Because it belongs to Orion, the Great Hunter. Look! There he is. Can you see those three stars close together?’

Plop drew his head back from the telescope and blinked.

‘Can I change eyes?’ he said. ‘This one’s getting very tired.’

‘Yes, of course. Now – see if you can find the Great Hunter.’

‘He has three stars close together, did you say?’

‘Yes – that’s his belt.’

‘And some fainter stars behind him?’

‘Yes – that’s his sword.’

‘I’ve got him!’ shouted Plop. ‘I’ve got Orion the Great Hunter. Oh, I never knew stars had names. Show me some more.’

‘Well, we’ll see if we can find the Pole Star, shall we? Hang on – I have to swing the telescope round for that.’

Plop had a ride on the telescope, and then the

man showed him how to find the Plough and the two stars pointing straight up to the Pole Star.

‘That’s a bright one, too, isn’t it?’ said Plop.

‘Yes. There! Now you can find that, you need never get lost, because that star is directly over the North Pole so you’ll always know where north is.’

‘Is that important?’ asked Plop.

‘Very important,’ said the man. ‘Heavens! What was that?’ An eerie, long-drawn shriek had torn the peace of the night.

‘Oh dear. I expect that’s my daddy,’ said Plop. They looked up. A ghostly, whitish form circled above them. ‘Yes, it is. I’d better let him know I’m here. Eeeeeek!’

‘Oh!’ said the man, jumping. ‘You should warn people when you’re going to do that. You know, I’ve often wondered what that noise was. Now I shall know it is only you or your father.’

‘Or my mother,’ said Plop. ‘I really must go. Thank you very, very much for teaching me about the stars.’ He hopped on to the telescope and bowed his funny little bow. ‘Goodbye.’

‘Goodbye, Master Barn Owl. Good stargazing!’

Plop flew up to join his father and together they

landed on the landing branch.

‘Well?’ said Plop’s mother.

‘The man with the telescope says DARK IS WONDERFUL, and he called me “Master Barn Owl” and . . .’

‘And what do you think, Plop?’

‘I know what *I* think,’ said Mr Barn Owl, not giving Plop a chance to reply. ‘I think Master Barn Owl has got a bit of a cheek to send his poor parents on an absolutely urgent search for food and then not bother to be in when they get back. I thought you were supposed to be starving?’

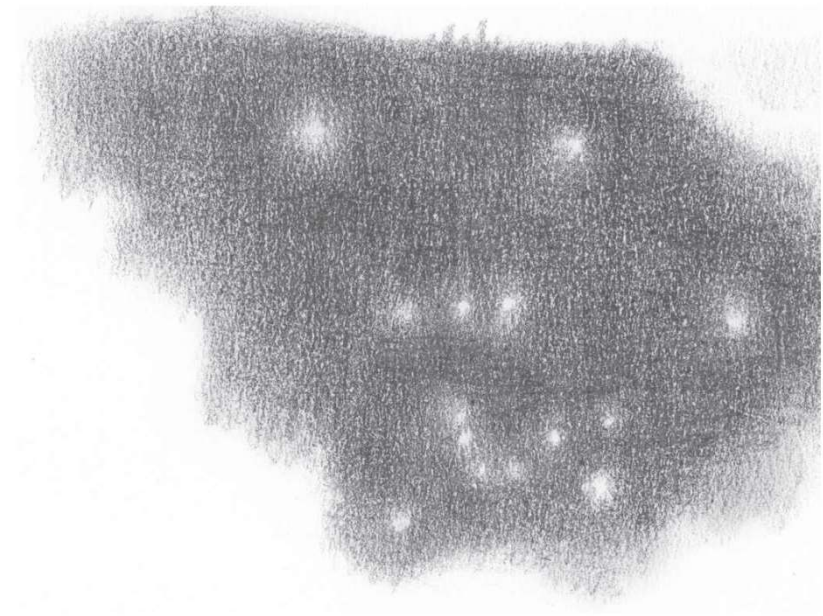
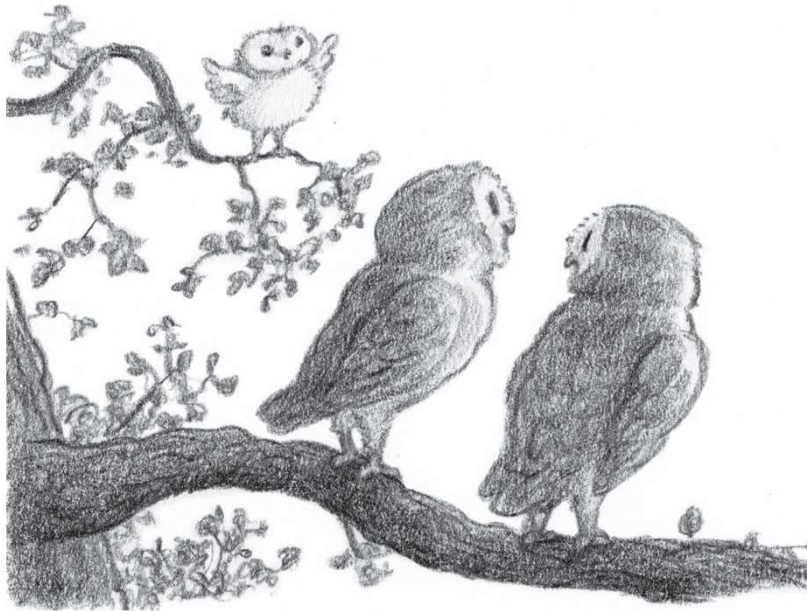
‘I am starving,’ said Plop, ‘but did you know that the Dog Star is fifty-four million, million miles away . . .’

‘Do you want your dinner or don’t you?’ said Mr Barn Owl.

‘Oh yes,’ said Plop. He gobbled down what his father had brought, and he gobbled down what his mother had brought, and not only did he not ask what it was that he had just eaten, but he did not even say ‘What’s next?’

What he said was, ‘Daddy, do you know how to find the Pole Star? Shall I show you?’

‘By all means,’ said Mr Barn Owl, giving his wife a slow wink. ‘Anything that can take your mind off your tummy like this *must* be worth seeing!’



Plop would not rest – and so neither could Mr and Mrs Barn Owl – until he had made quite sure that they could recognise all the stars which the man with the telescope had shown him.

He was still at it at about four o’clock in the morning.

‘Now are you quite sure you understand about the Pole Star?’ he said to his mother, who seemed to be being a bit dense about it.

‘I think so, dear,’ yawned Mrs Barn Owl. ‘You find the thing that looks like a plough but is actually a

big bear – or is it a small bear? – and the Pole Star is – um – near the North Star.’

‘The Pole Star is the North Star,’ Plop said impatiently, ‘and the two stars at the front of the Plough point to it. I don’t think you’re really trying. You haven’t been listening.’

‘Oh, we have,’ said Mr Barn Owl. ‘We have been listening for hours and hours. I think perhaps Mummy is just a little bit tired . . .’

‘But you must know how to find the Pole Star,’ said Plop, ‘or you might get lost.’

‘I never get lost,’ said his father indignantly, ‘and neither does your mother. Now be a good chap and go into the nest-hole and I’ll see if I can find you something nice for your supper. You can have it in bed for once, hmm?’

‘Oh, all right,’ said Plop, ‘but I really do feel that you should know about these things. I’ll have to try to explain again tomorrow.’

Mr Barn Owl turned to his wife in horror. ‘Oh, no! Not tomorrow night as well! I couldn’t stand it.’

‘Never mind, dear,’ said Mrs Barn Owl soothingly. ‘You haven’t had to do nearly as much hunting as usual.’

‘I’m not at all sure that all this star-gazing isn’t much more wearing than filling the bottomless pit!’ groaned Mr Barn Owl.

‘Oh, Daddy.’ Plop put his head out of the nest-hole. ‘Did I tell you about Orion? Orion is the Great Hunter and – oh, he’s gone!’

‘Yes, dear, he must finish his hunting before it gets light,’ said his mother. ‘Now you get back in there and mind you wash behind your ears properly. I’m coming to inspect you in a minute.’

So Plop had his supper in bed. And then, like a real night owl, he slept right through the daylight hours.

Task – Answer these questions about chapter 6.

1. What does Mr Barn Owl think about Plop’s tummy?
2. Why was it not a good night for looking at stars and planets?
3. Why couldn’t Plop see anything when he first looked through the telescope?
4. Name 3 of the stars that Plop saw.
5. How can you tell that Mr Barn Owl isn’t as interested in learning about the stars as Plop is?

LOOK
HERE
FOR A
CLUE