

DARK IS BEAUTIFUL

When Plop woke up, it was already getting dark. He came out on to the landing branch. There was an exciting frosty nip in the air. 'Now who's a day bird!' Plop shouted at the darkness. 'I am what I am!'

'What is he bellowing about?' said Mr Barn Owl, waking up with a start.

'I believe Plop is beginning to enjoy being an owl at last,' said Mrs Barn Owl, 'but ssh! Pretend to be asleep.'

Plop waddled up to inspect them. They were drawn up tall. Fancy sleeping on such a lovely night! Well, he wasn't going to hang about waiting for them. He might be missing something. The man with a telescope might be back, or some Boy Scouts,

or anything. He was going down to see.

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



He floated down on his little white wings and

landed like a feather. Feeling very pleased with himself, he looked around.

There were two strange lamps shining from the shadows under the tree. Plop went closer, and found that the lamps were a pair of unwinking eyes, and they belonged to a big black cat. Plop waited for a minute, but what he was expecting to happen didn't.

'Aren't you going to say anything?' he said at last. 'All the others did.'

'What should I say?' drawled the cat.

'Well, what did you think I was?' said Plop. 'I've been mistaken for a Catherine-wheel, and a thunderbolt, and a woolly ball, and a darling and a shooting star, and even a roly-poly pudding. Don't I remind you of anything?'

'You look like a baby owl to me,' said the cat. Then, seeing Plop's disappointed face, he added, 'but I *did* wonder for a moment whether it was starting to snow.'

'You thought I was a snowflake?' said Plop, brightening.

'Yes, but then when you landed, I saw that you looked more like a fat little snowman,' said the cat,

'and then I knew you were a baby owl.'

'Ah, but do you know what *kind* of owl I am?' said Plop.



'No,' admitted the cat, 'I can't say I do.'

'I am a barn owl,' Plop said.

'Really?' said the cat. 'Well, I'm a house cat, I suppose. My name is Orion.'

'Orion! The Great Hunter!' breathed Plop.

'Well, thank you,' said the cat, stroking his fine whiskers with a modest paw. 'I am rather a good mouser, as a matter of fact, but I didn't know I was as famous as that.'

'Orion,' said Plop again. 'Oh, I wish I had a name like that.'

'What is your name?' asked the cat.

‘Plop,’ said Plop. ‘Isn’t it awful?’

‘Oh, I don’t know – it’s – er – different,’ the cat said kindly, ‘and at least it’s short. There’s nothing short for Orion really, so I’m usually called “Puss”, which I can’t say I care for.’

‘I shall call you Orion,’ said Plop.

‘Thank you. Look – er – Plop. I was just going hunting. Would you like to come with me?’

‘Oh,’ said Plop. ‘I don’t know. I would like to, I think, but I’m not very happy about the dark.’

‘Oh dear. We’ll have to do something about that,’ said Orion.

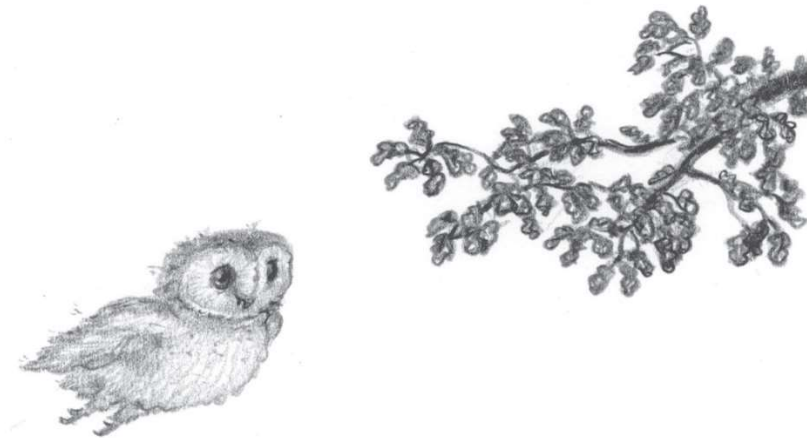
‘What?’ said Plop. ‘What can you do when you’re afraid of the dark?’

‘I don’t believe you are afraid of the dark, really,’ said Orion. ‘You just think you are. DARK IS BEAUTIFUL. Take a night like this. Look around you. Isn’t it beautiful?’

Plop looked. The moon had risen. Everything was bathed in its white light.

‘I love moonlight,’ said the cat. ‘Moonlight is magic. It turns everything it touches to silver, especially on frosty nights like this. Oh, come with me, Plop, and I will show you a beautiful world of

sparkling silver – the secret night-time world of cats and owls. The daytime people are asleep. It is all ours, Plop. Will you come?’



‘Yes!’ said Plop. ‘I will. Just wait while I tell Mummy where I’m going.’ He flew like an arrow up to the landing branch.

‘Well?’ said his mother.

‘Orion says that DARK IS BEAUTIFUL, and he has asked me to go hunting with him. I can go, can’t I, Mummy?’

‘Of course, dear. But who is Orion?’

‘The Great Hunter!’ said Plop. ‘See you later.’

When Mr Barn Owl came in from his first

expedition, he found his wife a bit agitated.

‘I think all that star-gazing has gone to Plop’s head,’ she said. ‘He said he was going hunting with Orion the Great Hunter. That was one of the stars he showed us last night, wasn’t it?’

‘Well, I saw him just now with a perfectly ordinary black cat,’ said Mr Barn Owl. ‘They were pussy-footing it up among the chimney pots on those houses near the church.’

‘So far from home – are you *sure* it was Plop you saw?’ said Mrs Barn Owl.

It was indeed Plop he had seen. Orion had taken him up to his roof-top world, the cat leading the way, climbing and leaping, Plop fluttering behind.

They sat together on the highest roof and looked down over the sleeping town, a black velvet cat and a little white powder puff of owl.

‘Well?’ said the cat.

‘It is – it is – oh, I haven’t the words for it,’ breathed Plop. ‘But you are right, Orion. I am a night bird after all. Fancy sleeping all night and missing this!’

‘And this is only one sort of night,’ said Orion. ‘There are lots of other kinds, all beautiful. There

are hot, scented summer nights; and cold windy nights when the scuffling clouds make ragged shadows across the ground; and breathless, thundery nights which are suddenly slashed with jagged white lightning; and fresh spring nights, when even the day birds can’t bear to sleep; and muffled winter nights when snow blankets the ground and ices the houses and trees. Oh, the nights I have seen – and you will see, Plop, as a night bird.’

‘Yes,’ said Plop. ‘This is my world, Orion. I must go home.’

‘What, already? We haven’t done any hunting yet, and I have lots more to show you – a glass lake with the moon floating in it, and . . .’

‘I must go, Orion. I want to surprise them. Thank you for – for showing me that I’m a night bird.’



He bobbed his funny little bow and the black cat solemnly bowed back. 'Goodbye, Plop,' he said, 'and many, many Good Nights!'

Plop took off, circled once, gave a final 'Eek!' of farewell, and then flew, straight and sure, back to his tree.

'Well?' said his mother.

Plop took a deep breath. 'The small boy said DARK IS EXCITING. The old lady said DARK IS KIND. The Boy Scout said DARK IS FUN. The little

girl said DARK IS NECESSARY. The Father Christmas Lady said DARK IS FASCINATING. The man with the telescope said DARK IS WONDERFUL and Orion the black cat says DARK IS BEAUTIFUL.'

'And what do you think, Plop?'

Plop looked up at his mother with twinkling eyes. 'I think,' he said. 'I think – DARK IS SUPER! But sssh! Daddy's coming. Don't say anything.'

Mr Barn Owl came in with a great flapping of wings. He dropped something at Plop's feet.

Plop swallowed it in one gulp. 'That was nice,' he said. 'What was it?'

'A vole.'

'I like vole,' said Plop. 'What's next?'

'Why don't you come with me and find out?' said Mr Barn Owl.

'Yes, please,' said Plop.

Mr Barn Owl blinked. 'What did you say?'

'I said, "Yes, please",' Plop said. 'I would like to come hunting with you.'

'I thought you were afraid of the dark!'

'Me?' said Plop. 'Afraid of the dark!'

That was a *long* time ago!'

‘Well!’ said his father. ‘What are we waiting for? A-hunting we will go!’

‘Hey, wait for me,’ said Plop’s mother. ‘I’m coming too.’

So they took off together in the moonlight, Mr and Mrs Barn Owl on each side and Plop in the middle.

Plop – the night bird.



Task – Answer these questions about chapter 7 (the final chapter).

1. How did Plop land this time?
2. What were the two strange lamps shining from the shadows under the tree?
3. Why is Orion a good name for a cat?
4. How does Orion describe the moonlight?
5. What does Plop finally decide about the dark?