



4

DARK IS NECESSARY

Plop asked ‘What’s next?’ a great many times during that night. He sat just outside the nest-hole making loud snoring noises. He was not asleep – just hungry. Owls always snore when they’re hungry.

‘Oh, Plop. I shall be glad when you can hunt for yourself,’ said Mrs Barn Owl wearily when Plop had

gulped down his seventh – or was it his eighth? – dinner.

‘What’s next?’ asked Plop.

‘Nothing,’ said his mother. ‘You can’t possibly have room for anything else.’

‘I have,’ said Plop. ‘My mouse place is full up, but my grasshopper place isn’t.’

‘That’s just too bad,’ said Mrs Barn Owl, stretching and settling herself down to roost.

Mr Barn Owl swooped in, clapping his wings. He dropped something at Plop’s feet. Plop swallowed it in one gulp. It was deliciously slippery.

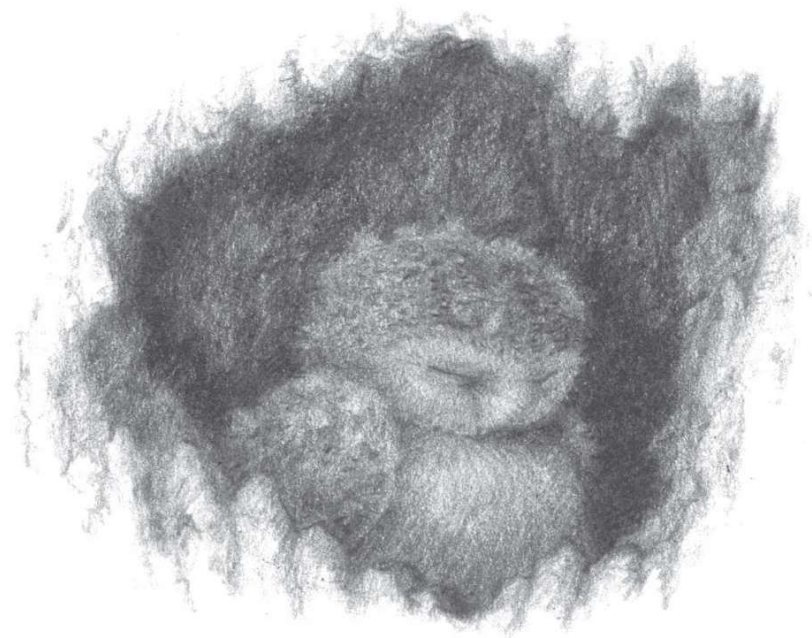
‘That was nice,’ he said. ‘What was it?’

‘A fish,’ said his father.

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

‘Bed,’ said Mr Barn Owl. He kissed his wife goodnight – or good day, I suppose it was – and settled himself to roost.

Plop made a few hopeful snoring noises, but it was clear that the feast was over. He wobbled into the nest-hole and was soon fast asleep himself.



It was well into the afternoon when he woke up. He came out on to the landing branch and looked around. His parents were still drawn up as still as carvings, but the squirrels from downstairs were chasing each other up and down the trunk, their tails flying behind them. Plop watched them for a bit. One of them scuttled along the branch just below Plop's and then stopped abruptly and began to wash his face. He did not know that Plop was there – after all, owls are *supposed* to be asleep

during the daytime.



Plop could not resist it. He bent down through the leaves and let out his very loudest 'Eeeek!'

The squirrel jumped into the air like a jack-in-a-box, his ears a-quiver and his eyes like marbles. He flashed down the trunk and vanished into his hole.

Plop jumped up and down with delight. But of course he had done it again: he had woken his mother.

'Plop!'

'Yes, Mummy?'

‘Go and find out some more about the dark, please, dear.’

‘Now?’ said Plop.

‘Now,’ said his mother. ‘Go and ask that little girl what she thinks about it.’

‘What little girl?’

‘That little girl sitting down there – the one with the ponytail.’

‘Little girls don’t have *tails*.’

‘This one does. Go on now or you’ll miss her.’

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

His landing was a little better than usual. He bounced three times and rolled gently towards the little girl’s feet.

‘Oh! A woolly ball!’ cried the little girl.

‘Actually I’m a barn owl,’ said the woolly ball.

‘An owl? Are you sure?’ she said, putting out a grubby finger and prodding Plop’s round fluffy tummy.

‘Quite sure,’ said Plop, backing away and drawing himself up tall.

‘Well, there’s no need to be huffy,’ said the little girl. ‘You bounced. You must expect to be mistaken

for a ball if you will go bouncing about the place. I’ve never met an owl before. Do you say “Tu-whit-a-woo”?’

‘No,’ said Plop. ‘That’s tawny owls.’

‘Oh, you can’t be a proper owl, then,’ said the little girl. ‘*Proper* owls say “Tu-whit-a-woo”!’



‘I *am* a proper owl!’ said Plop, getting very cross. ‘I am a barn owl, and barn owls go “Eeeek” like that.’

‘Oh, don’t *do* that!’ said the little girl, putting her hands over her ears.

‘Well, you shouldn’t have made me cross,’ said Plop. ‘Anyway – *you* can’t be a proper girl.’

‘*What* did you say?’ said the little girl, taking her hands off her ears.

‘I said you’re not a proper girl. Girls don’t have *tails*. Squirrels have tails, rabbits have tails, mice . . .’

‘This is a *ponytail*,’ said the little girl. ‘It’s the longest one in the class,’ she added proudly.

‘But why do you want to look like a pony?’ asked Plop.

‘Because – oh, because it’s the fashion,’ said the little girl. ‘Don’t you know *anything*?’

‘Not much,’ agreed Plop. ‘Mummy says that that is why I’m afraid of the dark – because I don’t know anything about it. Do *you* like the dark?’

The little girl looked at Plop in surprise. ‘Well, of course I do,’ she said. ‘There has to be dark. DARK IS NECESSARY.’

‘Dark is nessessess – is whatter?’

‘Necessary. We need it. We can’t do without it.’

‘I could do without it,’ said Plop. ‘I could do without it very nicely.’

‘Father Christmas wouldn’t come,’ said the little girl. ‘You’d have an empty stocking on Christmas day.’

‘I don’t wear stockings,’ said Plop, ‘and who is Father Christmas?’

‘Well, Father Christmas is a fat, jolly old man with a white beard, and he wears a red suit with a matching hat, and black boots.’

‘Is that the fashion?’ asked Plop.

‘No,’ said the little girl. ‘It’s just what he always wears in pictures of him – although I don’t know how anybody knows because nobody has ever seen him.’

‘What?’ said Plop.

‘Well, that’s what I’m trying to tell you. *Father Christmas only comes in the dark*. He comes in the middle of the night, riding through the sky on a sledge pulled by reindeer.’

‘Deer?’ asked Plop. ‘In the sky?’

‘Magic deer,’ said the little girl. ‘Everything about Father Christmas is magic. Otherwise he couldn’t possibly get round to all the children in the world in one night – or have enough toys for them all in his sack.’

‘You didn’t tell me about his sack.’

‘He has a sack full of toys and he puts them in the children’s stockings.’

‘In their stockings?’ said Plop. ‘With their feet in them? There can’t be much room –’

‘No, silly. We hang empty stockings at the ends of our beds for him to fill. I usually borrow one of Mummy’s, but last year I hung up my tights.’

‘And did he fill them?’ breathed Plop.

‘No – only one leg, but he did put a sugar mouse in the other one.’



‘I’d rather have had a real mouse,’ said Plop.

‘So would I, really,’ said the little girl. ‘I wanted a white mouse, but Mummy says that if a mouse comes into the house she will leave it, and I suppose

Father Christmas didn’t want me to be an orphan.’

Plop was thinking. ‘I don’t think owls have Father Christmas – not barn owls, anyway – and I haven’t got a stocking to hang up.’

‘Aah, what a shame,’ said the little girl.

‘Everybody should have Father Christmas. It’s so exciting waking up in the morning and feeling all the bumps in your stocking and trying to guess what is in it.’

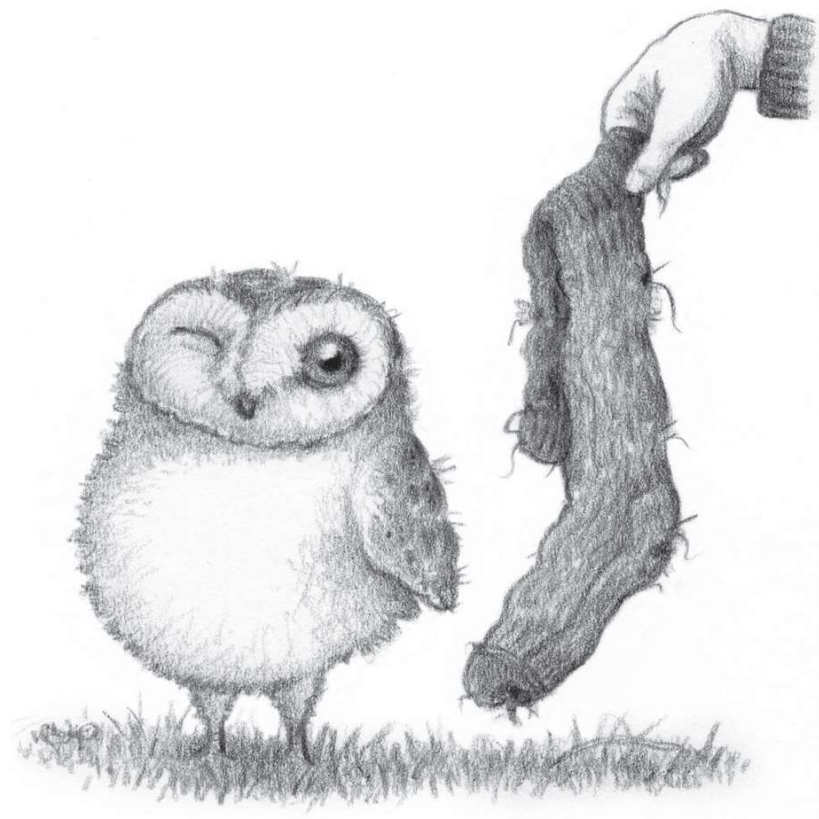
‘Oh, stop it,’ wailed Plop. ‘I wish he would come to me.’

‘Shut your eyes,’ the little girl said. ‘Go on. Shut them and you may get a surprise.’

Plop shut his eyes tight and waited. The little girl quickly pulled off her wellington and took off a sock. She was wearing two pairs because the boots were a bit big for her.

‘Open your eyes!’ she said to Plop, holding up the sock while she stood on one leg and wriggled her foot back into her wellington.

Plop opened his eyes – and then shut them again because he couldn’t believe what he saw.



‘Don’t you want it?’ said the little girl. ‘I know it’s a bit holey, but I don’t expect Father Christmas will mind.’

‘Oh, thank you,’ said Plop, taking it with his beak and then holding it in his foot. ‘Thank you *very* much. I’ll go and hang it up at once.’

‘Not yet,’ laughed the little girl. ‘You’ll have to wait until Christmas Eve. Well, I must go now. It must be nearly tea-time. Goodbye. I do hope Father Christmas will come to you.’



‘Goodbye,’ said Plop, bobbing his funny little bow. ‘You are very kind. You are a proper girl.’

‘And you have a very nice “Eeek”!’ said the little girl. ‘I’m going to practise it to make my brothers

jump. EEEK!’ She ran off, and Plop could hear her ‘eeeking’ right across the field.

Plop picked up the sock in his beak, and flew up to the landing branch.

‘Well?’ said his mother.

‘Jah lijjle yirl shays –’ he began with his mouth full of sock. He put it down and tried again. ‘The little girl says DARK IS NECESSARY, because of Father Christmas coming,’ he said.

‘And what do you think, Plop?’

‘I still do not like it AT ALL – but I’m going to hang up this sock on Christmas Eve.’

And Plop took his sock and put it away very carefully in a corner of the nest-hole ready for Christmas.

Task – To write a summary of this chapter.

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