

CHAPTER ONE

The Professor is Perplexed

In the north-western corner of England, in the Land Between the Lakes, March is a month of uncertain weather. One day brings snow and sharp frosts, the next offers mild temperatures and misty fog, and then it turns off blustery, wild, and wet. And whilst the distant fells may shiver under snowy shawls and mufflers of winter-brown bracken, the high mountain becks are festooned with frosty icicles, and the wind howls through the rock cairns, the lower dales hold the promise of green and on the brightest days, the blue lakes and tarns reflect the bluest of blue skies. In fact, it might be said that March is a month of all weathers, altogether at once.

Our story takes place in March, 1912. The previous year had brought many changes to England, including the coronation of a new king. George V had been crowned in June, and the twin villages of Near and Far Sawrey had celebrated the momentous event with a great flower show and a fair. There was a merry-go-round with wooden horses and camels for the children, a concert by the Village Volunteer Band (Lester Barrow on trombone, Lawrence Baldwin on coronet, Tyler Taylor and Clyde Clinder on clarinet, and Sam Stern on the concertina), and a spirited dance exhibition by the Hawkshead Morris Men, kitted out for the occasion in gay vests, ties, sashes, and hats.

After the almost unbearable excitement of this grand event, it had been hard for the village to return to the everyday work of gardening, dairying, haying, and harvesting. But somehow the villagers managed, and life went on as usual, more or less. Vicar Sackett performed two marriages in July and August, several new babies were born in September, and in October, three new cottages went up on the outskirts

of Far Sawrey, on land that had once been a sheep meadow. New people were moving to the Land Between the Lakes, and some of them brought new ideas and new ways of doing things, which did not sit well with the local folk.

November and December passed without any excitement whatever in the village, although there was plenty going on elsewhere. Captain Miles Woodcock (who serves as justice of the peace for Near and Far Sawrey) read in *The Times* that the Admiralty, now under the direction of Mr. Winston Churchill, was readying itself for military action against the German navy, should the need arise. Two new super-dreadnoughts had just been commissioned, with four more planned for 1912. The prospect of a German attack against Belgium (which was what the Admiralty seemed to most fear) was unsettling, not the sort of thing one likes to read in one's newspaper at the breakfast table on a peaceful Monday morning. But the captain was so blissfully happy with his new wife--the former Miss Margaret Nash, head teacher at Sawrey School--that he was able to put his concerns aside, at least for the moment. (If you have not read *The Tale of Applebeck Orchard* you might put the title on your reading list, for it tells the story of how this confirmed bachelor came to propose--on his knees, amid pieces of broken crockery and a spreading puddle of tea and milk--to Miss Nash.)

The new year brought storms, and as usual in the winter, the villagers kept to their firesides as much as possible. Like the previous months, January also crept by without incident, except that one of the Braithwaite boys slid down Stony Lane on his toboggan, crashed into the stone wall in front of High Green Gate, and broke his nose. In February, the Windermere ferry suffered a boiler breakdown and was closed for repairs for nearly a week, forcing everyone to stay on one side of the lake or the other, or go all the way down to the south end, across the River Leven on Newby Bridge, and back again. It was very inconvenient, and all were glad when Henry Stubbs got

the ferry operating, especially because February had been cold, and Newby Bridge was six long miles away.

Now it is March, and the weather has warmed. The month has so far been mild, with an early snowfall that melted away quickly. On days when the sky is not gray with scudding clouds and the air isn't thick with mist, the sun is pleased to shed a little extra light on the pleasant landscape below, to warm the red-berried hollies and the backs of wooly gray sheep grazing the hillsides. In fact, I think it is fair to say that there is no place on this earth that gives the sun so much pleasure as this lovely green land, with its rambling rock walls, quiet lanes, tranquil waters, and long, sweet silences.

Ah, those silences! We modern folk, who live with the raucous roar of traffic, the ringing of telephones, the blare of radio and television, and the constant company of tiny gadgets that pour words and music into our ears, may find it hard to imagine how silent it was in the country in those long-ago days. Even people who lived at the time in London never failed to remark the superb silences of the countryside, broken only by the most natural of sounds. On any given day in the Lake District village of Near Sawrey, all that could be heard was the cautionary bleating of Tibbie and Queenie (Herdwick ewes-in-chief at Miss Potter's Hill Top Farm), and the gossipy conversations of blue tits and finches, which spend the cold months deep in the hedges, busily doing as little as possible. One might occasionally hear the bell at St. Peter's, or the cheerful ring of George Crook's blacksmith's hammer against the anvil, but these sounds seemed as natural as Tibbie and the blue tits. Indeed, this world was so peaceful and serene that you might think you had stepped into a pastoral painting, where the painter had lovingly recorded the whole lovely landscape, including everything but the sound.

Or perhaps not.

Certainly not if you happen to be Professor Galileo Newton Owl, D. Phil., who has just returned from a lengthy visit with his cousin, Old Brown. Old Brown lives on an out-of-the way island in Derwentwater (made famous by Miss Beatrix Potter in her book, *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin*), which is cut off from communication. At this moment, dusk is falling, and the owl, his wings folded neatly, is perched atop the spreading oak on Oak Cake Crag, one of his favorite lookout posts. From the crag, a massive stone outcrop overlooking the blue waters of Windermere, he can see the full breadth of this fine lake. He cannot see its full length, however, for even though the professor has excellent eyesight (especially just at dusk), Windermere is nearly eleven miles long, the longest lake in all England.

But he can certainly see and hear enough to be both greatly annoyed and even more greatly perplexed, although I doubt he would want me to tell you this. Professor Owl likes to believe that he knows everything about everything. When he encounters something he doesn't understand, he becomes highly irritated. (Perhaps you know one or two people who resemble the professor in this regard.) Just at this moment, he is deeply puzzled, and therefore annoyed and even somewhat frightened, by the enormous lot of noise and commotion produced by an extraordinary winged creature, as big as a boat--no, bigger than a boat, although not quite so big as a barn--that has splashed up out of the water at a spot near Cockshott Point and is flying up the lake in a northerly direction.

The professor stared, incredulous. This thing, this ungainly, ungraceful, unbeautiful, boat-like creature, was flying? *Flying?*

Yes, flying. Not just whizzing along just above the surface of the water like a respectable goose or a Whooper swan, or splashing along first on one foot and then the other, as does the blue-footed booby you have seen in pictures. This creature had left the surface of the water on the far side of the lake and had already reached a

height nearly level with the professor's oak tree. And as it turned and came closer, our owl could make out that, whilst it lacked a proper tail, the thing seemed to have two extra wings! There were four--four!--altogether, although as far as the owl could make out, none of the four seemed to flap, as of course all wings should do.

The sight of this alien creature was startling enough, but I must tell you that there was more. Whereas the well-mannered flying creatures of the professor's acquaintance honked or hooted or crowed or croaked or quacked (each according to its nature), this one did none of that. Instead, it emitted an uncivil, ear-splitting, high-pitched, frantic drone, like a billion buzzing bees, punctuated by ragged, irregular clattering coughs, quite as if the thing were choking to death.

"Who-who-whoooo?" the professor muttered in astonishment and fright, opening both his eyes very wide. *"What-what?"*

Then he took a deep breath, summoned his imperial authority, lifted his wings, raised his voice, and demanded loudly, *"Just whoo-oo the devil are yooou, sir, and what dooo yooou think yooou are doooing?"* When the creature paid him no notice, he repeated the question, even more loudly and imperially.

Now, the professor--a substantial tawny owl with a look of significance about him--is widely acknowledged to be one of the most important birds of the Land Between the Lakes. All of the other creatures are accustomed to answer respectfully when he speaks, and for good reason. It is true certainly that he has earned an international reputation for his scholarship in celestial mechanics (which, if you are not familiar with it, is a study of the motions of astronomical objects such as stars and planets), achieved by years spent in diligent search of the night skies with a telescope from his beech-tree observatory and residence on Claife Heights. Amongst his peers, he is widely respected for his detailed work on celestial navigation.

Locally, however, the professor is better known for his studies in applied natural history. He takes a special and very personal interest in the mannerisms and tastes of certain feathered,

furred, and scaly creatures who live in his territory, which extends across the Land Between the Lakes. Having selected and captured his research subjects, he carries them back to his beech tree, where they are invited to join him for a midnight snack. I think you can see why he is respected and even feared.

But this exotic fixed-wing flying creature was not as respectful as the natives. In fact, the thing simply ignored the professor's repeated questions--*rudely* ignored them, I am sorry to say. Buzzing and clacking and clattering, it flew very close to Oat Cake Crag, taunting the professor. Then it cocked its wings, turned sharply (How *did* it do that without a single flap?) and buzzed and clanked and clattered and coughed itself out of sight around a wooded point of land.

The professor stared incredulously after it. Something ominous had obviously happened while he was away on holiday. There had been a breakdown in the natural order of things, and an alien flying thing had invaded his territory. If it were permitted to stay, it was very likely to multiply (since it is in the nature of all creatures to reproduce themselves), which would mean that the skies would soon be filled with heaven-knows-how-many impertinent flying things who made a great deal of noise and rudely refused to identify themselves when challenged. To make matters worse, he knew nothing about the origin of this incredible thing, its capacities, and (most of all) its intentions. It might be entirely good-natured and benign, or it might attack. It might bite. And since it was obviously very large, its bite was quite likely to be deadly.

The professor shuddered. He himself was a strong flyer and could likely evade any tactics that even a much larger enemy--such as this *thing*, which was as large as a thrashing machine--might employ. But what about the smaller birds, especially the water birds? The great crested grebe, the mallards and teals and tufted ducks? The shelduck and the red-breasted merganser and the grey lag geese and oh so many others--what of them? A creature of this immense size must have an enormous appetite and require constant feeding. Why, it could decimate Windermere's bird population in no time. And then it might go on to savage the scaled, furred, and feathered

creatures who lived on the land. If nothing were done to stop it, many of the owl's research subjects might simply vanish.

Well! This situation obviously required some very careful attention. The professor thought for a few moments. Then, with a sweep of his powerful wings, he lifted up and flew away. He was on his way to The Brockery, a short distance away on Holly How, to discuss this dreadful business with his friend Bosworth Badger. Bosworth was always fully informed about everything that went on in the Land Between the Lakes. The owl was confident that, between the two of them, they would be able to come up with a plan.

Normally, of course, he would invite the badger to his beech tree, where they could discuss the matter in greater comfort than the cramped confines of Badger's underground home. But time was short, and as it happened (what a lucky coincidence), it was just about teatime, and tea at the Brockery was always quite substantial. The professor felt that a comforting cuppa would go down a treat, with perhaps a cheering bit of ham and cheese between two slices of buttered bread, and one (or two) scones. Yes, indeed. There was nothing like a bite of something to make a bird fit to tackle whatever challenges might come his way.

I'm sure you would like to follow the professor and find out what the badger knows about this alien airborne creature. But if you don't mind, I think we will catch up to the professor later. Instead, we will go over to Hill Top Farm, where Miss Beatrix Potter has just come indoors from an afternoon in the garden and is about to put the kettle on to boil for her own cup of tea.