

Donald at School(c)

Uncle Bill in his old, shabby, but comfortable arm chair, stretched his short, stubby legs out towards the fire, which burnt brightly in the large grate where the pine tree logs were crackling merrily, casting yellow flames which flickered up the soot blackened chimney. The fire gave out a soothing warmth. Outside the house a strong November wind blew on to the window panes, accompanied by a scud of cold rain which rattled on the glass. Scarlett, his twelve year old niece, was curled up on the large roomy settee, idly turning the pages of a fairy story book. Everything in the house was calm and peaceful. Auntie was out shopping, and Uncle Bill twiddled his toes, his slippers kicked off, which wouldn't have been allowed if Auntie had been present.

"Did I ever tell you the story of the Lobb family?" asked Uncle Bill suddenly, making Scarlett jump. She gave him a fierce look from her strangely almond shaped, blue eyes.

"No," she replied sharply. "And you almost made me bite, my tongue."

"Well the Lobbs lived on the other side of the river from Purley village," said Uncle Bill disregarding Scarlett's complaint of a bitten tongue." They were a very nice, but very strange family. There was Mr and Mrs Lobb and their son Donald. They lived in a small house they called the Willow Tree Cottage."

"Why?" asked Scarlett. She frowned. "Did it look like a willow tree?"

"No," replied Uncle Bill, "it was just a lovely little red brick cottage, with a thatched straw roof, but it was surrounded by willow trees which lined the banks of the river Thames. The cottage was in Lobbs Wood which was a wonderful woodland where the animals were all tame. Red squirrels played in the trees, and lovely little deer wandered quite tamely about the trees and bushes.

In Lobbs wood, everything was lush and green with sunlight dappling the long, shining grass. Smooth moss gathered in clumps about the roots of the tall trees. White, pink, yellow and red flowers decorated the undergrowth and bushes surrounding a large, circular mound of fresh, green grass. This was known as the Magic Circle, where the little woodland animals played their games with each other. It was around the hill Reginald, the rabbit and all his relations, their white scuds bobbing as they raced about, watched by their indulgent parents. Sammy the squirrel and the other red squirrels dashed and scampered up and down the trunks of the trees, or raced each other along the overhanging branches. In the centre of the grassy mound Bryn, the badger, ran in circles pursued by Ferdinand the fox. Every so often they stopped for breath, and swapped places. Then it was Bryn who had to chase Ferdinand. On the edge of the wood Ollie the Otter paddled happily in the shallow, rippling water of the river. The whole of the animal's fun-time antics was watched with great amusement by Dinky and Dainty, the little deer-twins, and also by Professor Owl who taught animal speak in the Old Boathouse School. The learned owl tucked up his large, white wings and slowly closed his big, yellow eyes and happily dozed in the autumn sunshine. Through the trees could be seen the shining, green water of the river Thames as it poured with a muted roar, over the weir at Mapledurham Lock.

"Can we go and see Lobbs Wood?" asked Scarlett sitting up, her face aglow.

“Not at the moment, said Uncle Bill. “The time I’m speaking about was about sixty years ago. But let me tell you the story of Donald’s first day at Professor Owl’s animal speak school. Professor Owl, as I said, was a very large, white owl. He was able to communicate in both animal and human speech, and he taught at a wonderful little school. The old school was a little way up river from Mapledurham Lock. But Donald was very lucky as George, the Lock keeper of Mapledurham Lock used to row him up to the school every morning, and bring him home in the afternoons

Donald wasn’t very keen on going to Professor Owl’s school. He would rather have gone to the village school on the other side of the river in the village of Purley. He explained this to a pigeon one morning, who fortunately could converse with Donald.

The pigeon was cooing outside Donald’s bedroom window, and the noise woke Donald early one morning. The big grey bird was perched on the branch of the willow tree next to Donald’s open bedroom window. It was making such a loud cooing noise that Donald heard it even though he had been fast asleep and had been dreaming pleasant dreams.

“Do you mind, Mr Pigeon?” snapped Donald getting out of bed, opening his bedroom window and looking angrily at the noisy pigeon. His bedroom was on the top floor of the Lobbs’ willow tree house. Donald leaned over the window sill and looked out onto the big branch which had the willow leaves waving gaily in the wind. Donald saw that the noisy pigeon was enjoying itself on the branch, apparently doing a little shuffling dance. First it was balancing on its left foot, then, after giving a little hop, it changed to the right clawed foot. It then hopped back once more to the left foot. With each hop it gave a little musical “coo” whilst ruffling its feathers.

“Sorry!” said the pigeon, “did I disturb you? I was just sitting here, not thinking of anything and I must have been cooing without realising it. Sorry”, he said again and with an apologetic cough he flapped his wings and was preparing to fly away.

“No, come back!” Donald called anxiously thinking he had frightened the, cooing bird.” I’m really very, very sorry, I shouldn’t have snapped at you. It’s just that I’m very worried at the moment. You have every right to sit on that branch and dance and coo for as long as you like if it amuses you.”

Donald turned away and was about to close the window.

“Worried?” cooed the pigeon. “Why a young fellow like you shouldn’t worry, I thought it was only us old people who worried about things.”

“Well, to tell you the truth,” said Donald, “ I’m worried about having to go to school for the first time today.”

“No need to worry,” the pigeon assured him. “All my chicks have been to the village school. We roost in the eaves of the building and learn our lessons through the open windows. It’s remarkable the things we can hear from the teachers at the Purley children’s’ school. The pupils there are very happy and they seem to learn a lot of interesting things.”

“Well the problem is,” said Donald wistfully, “I’m not going to the village school, I’m being sent to the Old Boat House School. It’s on the river bank towards Pangbourne. My father wants me to learn animal-speak and the only way to do so, he says, is to go to the school where the animals have their lessons,”

“Oh! Yes, I’ve heard of the Old Boat House School,” said the pigeon. “A lot of animals from this side of the river send their youngsters there. I know where it is, you’ll find it behind the ruined boat house, among the tall trees and bushes. It’s not very far from Hardwick House. You pass it on your way up-river. Professor Owl is the Head Teacher, he is very wise, old white owl, but I have known him to be very strict if his pupils misbehave.”

Donald told him that all young birds and animals in Lobbs Wood were expected to go to the school. He was lucky in as much as George, the Lock Keeper at Mapledurham Lock, was going to row him up to the school after breakfast each day and collect him after school.

“You will enjoy yourself there,” cooed the pigeon encouragingly, “I’ve seen all sorts of young animals going there. Professor Owl speaks all their languages; you will find it very useful later in life.”

“Thank you,” said Donald thoughtfully, but he was still dubious about the prospect of going to a strange school. As the pigeon flew away Donald called out loudly: “It was very kind of you, you’ve made me a lot happier.”

It was still early morning and Donald felt he must go out into the lovely garden beneath his bedroom window as the sun was just beginning to shine. He did not want to get dressed. He slipped on his tartan dressing gown and little slippers, and then crept quietly down the stairs, being careful not to disturb his parents.

He gently lifted the latch of the front door, which squeaked softly as he opened it. He walked out into the world of his father’s colourful, flower garden. It was still early, but, even so, he could feel the warmth of the morning sun as he wandered about the very pretty, little grounds. Mr Lobb spent a lot of his time in tending this garden. The hard work he put in was evident from the colourful array of strongly scented flowers. There were red roses, orange wallflowers blue, forget-me-nots and yellow primroses; pervading over all was the smell of recently cut grass. The early morning dew was still visible, on the, large, bedewed spiders’ webs which were hanging from the rose bushes growing around the lawn.

Through the soles of his slippers Donald could feel that the grass was still quite damp, and, slipping them off walked about the lawn bare footed. He stepped on a large pointed stone, which hurt. Donald was vexed at finding a stone on his father’s neat lawn and threw the stone with some considerable force into the branches of one of the large willow trees, which hung over part of the lawn.

“Oy!” There came a, loud indignant squawk from inside the tree. “Who threw that stone at me?”

Donald stood petrified. He had no idea that there was anybody in the tree.

“Sorry,” he gasped and turned red with embarrassment. “I didn’t know that there was anybody there.”

“You might have had my eye out,” snapped the hidden voice.” Who are you?”

“Please sir, I’m called Donald,” he whispered.

“Donald! I’ll remember that. “A large, white owl swooped out of the tree and perched on the grass close to where the petrified Donald stood.

“Some people should think of what they are doing,” snapped the owl, he ruffled his feathers, obviously in a very bad temper.

“Please sir,” stammered Donald,” can you tell me your name?”

“You’ll know soon enough,” snapped the owl as he swooped from the lawn and disappeared into the big, bushy willow tree.

This little episode worried Donald, and, leaving the lawn, he hurried back into the house where he found his mother was preparing breakfast. She was wearing a flowery dressing gown and looked plump and comfortable as she stood over the wood-burning stove waiting for the kettle to boil. She poured boiling water into a pot, making early morning tea for Mr Lobb, who glanced up from the Purley Parish magazine he was reading, as Donald came into the room.

“Hello Donald, you’re up early, “said his father,” what mischief have you been up to?”

“Nothing father,” Donald blushed and looked down at the carpet,” I’ve just been admiring your flowers in the garden.”

Donald knew how proud Mr Lobb was of his garden and thought that it would please him to think that his son was admiring his father’s handiwork. Mr Lobb smiled contentedly and resumed his reading of the local magazine. Donald perched himself on the arm of the chair in which Mr Lobb was sitting.

“Must I go to the animal speak School today?” asked Donald, in a wheedling tone,” Why can’t I go to the village school; like the other children do?”

“Donald,” said his farther sternly, putting down his magazine and turning towards his son. “We’ve been into all this before, I want you to learn animal speak. We river people need the animals to tell us all when storms and such like are coming, so that we can take the necessary precautions. How can they possibly tell us if we couldn’t communicate with them?”

“I see,” Donald nodded his head,” of course it is important to learn animal speech...”

“It’s ‘animal speak’ which Professor Owl teaches at the Old Boat House School,” corrected Mr Lobb. “Not Animal Speech. Think of all the things we would miss out on, if we failed to appreciate the mysteries of Nature. Our ability to learn all about the animal world would just disappear”

Solemnly Donald nodded his head; he understood what his father was saying.

“Professor Owl has a tremendous knowledge of the world of animal speak. Where would this world be today if nobody could speak to the animals?”

Mrs Lobb handed Mr Lobb his cup of tea, and she listened whilst her husband told Donald about the animal speak school.

“Donald, “his mother said,” you’ll enjoy yourself at the Old Boathouse School, Professor Owl is very nice, you’ll often see him flying around here, and I believe he has a home in one of the big willow trees. I’m surprised you haven’t met him yet!”

“What does he look like?” asked Donald.

“Oh, he is a big owl and pure white,” his father said. “You’ll like him and I know he’ll like you.”

“I wonder,” muttered Donald to himself as he sat down at the breakfast table and moodily, thoughtfully began to eat his crispy cornflakes. Mr and Mrs Lobb exchanged glances and Mr Lobb nodded.

“He’ll soon grow to love it at the Old Boathouse School,” said Mr Lobb, “I know I did and I had lots of fun!”

The Old Boathouse seen from the opposite, or Purley, side of the river bank looks a total wreck; it is a rundown, ramshackle, old wooden building with its sides and roof collapsing from exposure to all weather and river erosion. It looks dilapidated and unused. All that can be seen of the inside of the building are rotting wooden planks and a large expanse of still, black water.

The boathouse is surrounded by large elm trees and tall reeds. At the back of the boat house is the animal speak school entrance this cannot be seen from the front. Pleasure boats cruise up and down the river, and people walk along the river bank on their way to Pangbourne without knowing of the school’s existence. Thick bushes at the rear of the old boathouse hide the animals’ entrance .

The classroom itself was very large, light and airy, with a few little desks. Standing in front of the desks there is a large blackboard on an easel, and a circular, polished, wooden table. Behind the table stands a huge, wooden chair with a large, circular back on which professor Owl perches as he instructs his charges on the basics of animal speak.

Donald’s arrival at the Old Boathouse School on his first morning was by rowing boat from Lobbs Wood, George, the Mapledurham lockkeeper, rowed him up, as promised, to the old boat house All the time Donald attended the school George would row him up and down the river every school day. When he arrived at the old boat house George anxiously watched Donald climb from the rocking rowing boat and stumble along the slippery, rickety wooden planks at the side. George had moored against the unsafe looking jetty, but waited patiently until he was sure Donald was safe, he then waved a friendly hand and pulled the boat out into the middle of the fast flowing river. With a final wave George, rowing with the current, returned to Mapledurham lock.

Donald, following his father's directions on how to find the school, walked along the jetty and found the well-trodden path, which led to the entrance of the school. He paused then knocked gently and nervously, at the school house door, it was a rough, painted solid piece of wood. time, Professor Owl had commenced the lessons..

"Come in," squawked an agitated and annoyed voice. Donald opened the door and saw rows of little animals; some sitting, some standing, some perched by the desks. They all turned NS looked at him curiously. Donald blushed and shuffled his feet in embarrassment. Perched on the back of a large wooden chair in front of the class, was a big, white owl..

"Please sir," Donald stammered, very, very frightened. "I've come to school."

"You're late," snapped the owl." What's your name?" Donald swallowed several times before answering.

"No! Don't bother to tell me – I know, your name, its Donald and you're the rock thrower!" He paused and gave Donald a severe look over the top of the pince-nez he wore;" I suppose you're sorry now, aren't you?" Donald mumbled a reply which could best be interpreted as an apology. "Well don't just stand there boy, come in and sit down at your desk – it's that one there," he pointed with a white wing," in front of Sammy the squirrel!"

Donald eased into a small chair behind a desk with an ink well on it. He bent himself almost double as though to hide himself behind the ink well, and peeked anxiously over the top of the desk at the formidable Professor Owl.

The professor at that moment was busy with his register, and was ticking off names. Donald took a quick look around the class room. There were quite a lot of young animals present. Apart from the squirrel named Sammy, there were twin baby deer, Dinky and Dainty, a badger, called Bryn, a mole named Tom, six bunny rabbits, Sidney a water vole and an otter called Ollie. Perched on the window-sill were two white doves who coo-ed quietly to themselves. Donald noticed that there were no pigeons and guessed that they were in the rafters of the village school. He did find this a very strange and mixed class, but he was pleased to see that all the animals seemed friendly and sat quietly together. The Professor continued marking his register. He abruptly looked up: "Where is Ferdinand the fox?" he asked looking around the classroom. Nobody answered.

"Late again," sighed the Professor..!"

"Right class," said Professor Owl, closing the register, and turning towards his pupils. "We are here today to learn animal speak."

The little animals stiffened and looked at each other.

“For the best-behaved pupil today there will be a gold star and a certificate which they can take home and show to their parents.” He rapped on his desk with a cane. “In this class there is a certain pupil who threw rocks at me this morning, but, I’m fair and he will be included! I’m not prejudiced,” said the professor with a hard glare at Donald,” even though he might have had my eye out or broken my wing, by his thoughtless behaviour!”

The little animals gave a nervous titter and all glanced at Donald who wished that the floor would open up and engulf him.

Suddenly, from outside the building, came a scrambling noise and a shriek. The classroom door burst open and a young fox raced into the room, running frantically round and round and eventually came to rest cowering next to Donald’s knees.

“Ferdinand the fox, what’s the meaning of this?” Professor Owl was annoyed and fluttered his white wings in anger.

“Please sir,” the young fox squealed in fright thrusting his head out between Donald’s knees. “I’m being chased by some big, fox hounds. They’ve chased me everywhere since I left home this morning.”

The little fox suddenly burst into tears and Donald stroked and patted him gently on the head to calm him down, for the fox was trembling with fright.

Professor Owl was astounded. All the animals in his class had to behave properly and the orders were that they must not attack another under any circumstances for his classroom was a perfect animal sanctuary.

“It’s all right,” the teacher soothed the little fox. “You’re safe here, nothing is going to happen to you.” This made Donald realise what a kind and gentle teacher was the professor. The fox wriggled out from under Donald and the professor pointed to a spare desk at the far side of the class room.

“You’ll be safe over there,” he told him. “I’ll make sure nothing happens to you.”

Hardly were the words uttered when there was a loud snarling and scrabbling at the classroom door which burst open with a vicious and frightening bang. Three large, brown and white fox-hounds bound into the class room. Their white tails were upright and stiff.

“Where is that fox?” snarled their leader, named Cecil. The dog peered around the classroom, with his blood-shot eyes.

Ferdinand gave a cry of terror and tried to push himself through the wall of the class room to escape. His movement attracted the attention of Cecil who bounded forward.

“Stop this wicked behaviour” roared Professor Owl, rapping on the table with his cane.” That fox is under my protection and this classroom is an animal sanctuary. I won’t allow you to harm a hair of his tail – leave this class room immediately.”

All three fox-hounds stood stock still in amazement. They had never heard an owl speak to them like this before. Then they snarled and made once more for the unfortunate Ferdinand now huddled down against the wall, his little brown eyes brimming over with tears of terror.

Donald was crouching down, heart beating in fright and almost hidden under his desk, for he was petrified of these three howling, fierce dogs, with their snarling jaws and long, white fangs.

Professor Owl fluttered over the savage dogs slashing his cane through the air above their ears, squawking.

"Get out. Get out!" he was squawking.

It was probably the sight of the brave owl attacking these dogs which made Donald act. He was afraid of the dogs, but knew he had to help. With a loud shout he launched himself up to help the professor. He remembered that all bullies were cowards, and these three dogs were bullies. With beating heart and tears of rage in his eyes he grabbed Cecil by the tail and yanked, at the same time, yelling his loudest in sheer blind panic. He was very, very frightened of these vicious bloodhounds, but he hated to see bullying, and the petrified Ferdinand was obviously the victim.,

"Get out you horrible hounds – and leave that little fox alone!" yelled Donald in his loudest and fiercest voice.

The dogs came to a shuffling stop. They had not seen until he had jumped up and grabbed Cecil's tail. The wicked dogs once more advanced on the unfortunate Ferdinand, their eyes gleaming.

"Didn't you hear me?" shouted Donald. He let go of Cecil's tail and grabbed the cane from under the wing of Professor Owl." I said, 'Get out!'"

He whacked the nearest dog across its flanks, and although Professor Owl's cane was thin, it was also strong and whippy and it made, the hound squeal with pain Although he was small, Donald was also surprisingly strong and the cane he wielded bit fiercely into the dog's side, making it howl.

Cecil and one of the other dogs turned in amazement when they saw a little boy with a whippy cane, advancing on them both with blazing eyes. Professor Owl also swooped down and pecked viciously at Cecil's ears and the top of the dog's head.

That decided it, the three fox hounds thought they had had enough. They were brave enough when they were chasing a small, frightened, fleeing fox, but Donald was right, all bullies are cowards at heart.

Cecil and bounded away followed by the other two hounds. They leapt over the desks and chairs scattering the little animal in their desperate efforts to get away from Donald and the fluttering Professor Owl. They were last seen lolloping on long, legs over the fields. They ran frantically towards the big wooded hills behind Hardwick House, their loud, yelping, cries fading in the distance.

"I think that is the last we'll see of them," Professor Owl chuckled and patted Donald kindly on the back. "You did very well my boy, very well indeed – I won't forget your courage."

Donald resumed his seat and the Professor once more perched on the back of the large chair. Ferdinand gave Donald a very grateful look. To the little animals Donald was a hero. At playtime the class went out into the large field at the side of the school house and played among the trees, bushes.

For lunch Mrs Lobb had packed a nice, little packet of cheese sandwiches and a shiny red apple for Donald. He sat down with Ferdinand and Sammy the red squirrel, on a fallen tree trunk, and shared his lunch with them.

The other animals, released from the classroom, played hide and seek and chased each other with little squeals of pleasure. It was all just fun and sheer enjoyment, for the rules about not hurting or biting each other, extended to the fields outside the school, just as much as in the classroom. After the alarms of the morning, they were enjoying their freedom and safety from danger. in the shallows and emerged from the river, shaking water from his fur over them.

After their playtime break, , Professor Owl called the class to attention and he pointed at Donald and said that for being such a brave boy he was going to award him with a special gold star, a certificate and make him the classmate of the month. Professor Owl also said he was going to recommend Donald to Lady Rose who owned Hardwick House, the big house, on whose land the Old Boathouse School was situated.

Donald took the rolled up sheet of parchment, on which Professor Owl had written his name and had attached the special gold star for bravery. Donald put it carefully away in his coat pocket, after proudly showing it to his classmates. He swelled with pride as he walked to the small jetty in front of the old boathouse, where George was waiting patiently for him.

George examined the parchment and gold star with great interest. He was proud of Donald and his morning's achievement. He knew all the fox-hounds and had, driven them away from Mapledurham Lock when they had attacked his ducks.

"Did you have a good day?" asked George as he rowed slowly out into the middle of the river.

"I certainly did," said Donald gripping the sides of the boat. "They are all wonderful little animals there and I made such a good friend of a fox called Ferdinand and a little red squirrel called Sammy."

"I'm pleased," smiled George, rowing easily with the tide, "I knew you'd enjoy yourself!"

He dipped his oars in the water and rowed slowly and carefully back to Lobbs Wood, where Mr and Mrs Lobb were overjoyed when Donald showed them his precious certificate and gold star.

"What happened to the fox hounds?" asked Scarlett.

"Oh! They ran away" said Uncle Bill," when last seen they were disappearing into the woods over the hills and they never bothered the Old Boathouse School ever again."

"Did little Ferdinand get home safely?"

“Oh! Yes quite safely,” Uncle Bill assured her, “he was a brave little fox. He appears in quite a few of Donald’s later adventures and he particularly enjoyed sharing Donald’s cheese sandwiches at lunch time.”

“And the red apple” asked Scarlett

“No, he shared that with Sammy the squirrel!”