

HUMOR



James Thurber

(1894-1961)

The Owl Who Was God (1940)

Once upon a starless midnight there was an owl who sat on the branch of an oak tree. Two ground moles tried to slip quietly by unnoticed.

“You!” said the owl.

“Who?” they quavered, in fear and astonishment, for they could not believe it was possible for anyone to see them in that thick darkness.

“You two!” said the owl.

The moles hurried away and told the other creatures of the field and forest that the owl was the greatest and wisest of all animals because he could see in the dark and because he could answer any question.

“I’ll see about that,” said a secretary bird, and he called on the owl one night when it was again very dark. “How many claws am I holding up?” said the secretary bird.

“Two,” said the owl, which was right.

“Can you give me another expression for ‘that is to say’ or ‘namely’?” asked the secretary bird.

“To wit,” said the owl.

“Why does a lover call on his love?” asked the secretary bird.

“To woo,” said the owl.

The secretary bird hastened back to the other creatures and reported that the owl was indeed the greatest and wisest animal in the world because he could see in the dark and because he could answer any question.

“Can he see in the daytime, too?” asked a red fox.

“Yes,” echoed a dormouse and a French poodle.

All the other creatures laughed loudly at this silly question, and they set upon the red fox and his friends and drove them out of the region. Then they sent a messenger to the owl and asked him to be their leader.

When the owl appeared among the animals it was high noon and the sun was shining brightly. He walked very slowly, which gave him an appearance of great dignity, and he peered about him with large staring eyes, which gave him an air of tremendous importance.

“*He’s God!*” screamed a Plymouth hen.

And the others took up the cry “*He’s God!*”

So they followed him wherever he went and when he began to bump into things they began to bump into things, too. Finally he came to a concrete highway and he started up the middle of it and all the other

creatures followed him. Presently a hawk, who was acting as outrider, observed a truck coming toward them at fifty miles an hour, and he reported to the secretary bird and the secretary bird reported to the owl.

"There's danger ahead," said the secretary bird.

"To wit?" said the owl.

The secretary bird told him.

"Aren't you afraid?" he asked.

"Who?" said the owl calmly, for he could not see the truck.

"He's God!" cried all the creatures again, and they were still crying "He's God!" when the truck hit them and ran them down.

Some of the animals were merely injured, but most of them, including the owl, were killed.

Moral: You can fool too many of the people too much of the time.