

# White Rabbit

*By Bob Papp*

## 🌀 PREAMBLE 🌀

One of the really nice things about nature is that you can loose yourself in it. Whether you're out on a hike, or canoeing a river, or sitting around a fire at the edge of a woods, all the worries and cares of your everyday life just seem to vanish. Maybe at home you have some bills waiting to be paid, or if you're still in school you might have some multiplication table to memorize, or books to read.

Well, out here those just don't matter. Nature just doesn't care.

And the longer you're out here, the more of those everyday worries you can forget.

Some people say that if you're out here long enough, you'll even forget your own name. Now, I'm sure you all remember your names, because you just came here from your homes and your supper tables, but if you were to stay out here long enough, you might just forget. If you got to that point, you would also forget a lot of the things you've learned while growing up. Things like, "animals can't talk," and "trees don't have hearts." And when you're able to forget all those lies that we've been taught, then the magic really starts.

The story that I'm going to tell you tonight is about a man who forgot all those things and discovered instead some magic. Now, I'd tell you this man's name, but he forgot it, so nobody really knows what it is.

And I would tell you when he lived, but, well, that's been forgotten too, except to say that it was a long time ago. We do know that he spent some time in these parts and that he went into Nature because he wanted to forget some things that weighed heavy on him, but we don't know what those things were, because, of course, he forgot them. Now, there are many stories about this man and his long, long life, but I can only tell you one tonight. And the story I've decided to tell is one called "White Rabbit," and it goes like this...

## 🌀 WHITE RABBIT 🌀

Late one night the man sat at his campfire at the edge of the woods, whittling a stick. He had just finished his supper and so his belly was full and warm and he whittled because it brought him peace. As he whittled, he heard about him the calls of the whip-poor-will [CALL] and he heard an owl in the distance [CALL] and the man was pleased that he could be a part of this world as well. He was whittling for quite some time, when rather suddenly, half his campfire went out in a great puff of smoke [EXTINGUISH WITH WATER PAIL?].

The man looked up and saw that what fire remained seemed to be leaning hard to the far side of the ring, as if something would push it clean out of the ring! And at the edge of the ring, where the fire had gone out, sat one, large, entirely white, rabbit. Well, the man thought this a strange turn of events in an otherwise normal evening.

So he looked at the rabbit. And the rabbit looked at him. And both looked at each other. And neither said a word. The man shook his head and went back to his whittling, except that he tried to fling his chips into the area where the fire had gone out, in hopes that the fire would spread back so he wouldn't have to find more logs. Time passed, until, eventually, the rabbit cleared its throat and said, "Ehehmm. Brother, I have a tale to tell."

Well, the man had been in the wilderness for quite some time. Long enough in fact to forget his name, but not quite long enough to forget that rabbits weren't supposed to talk. And so he looked up and gave that rabbit the queerest stare. And the rabbit stared back. And neither said a word. So, the man went back to his whittling. What else was he to do?

Eventually, the rabbit cleared its throat again and said, "Ehehmm! BROTHER, I said I have a tale to tell, and if you would be so kind as to not interrupt me anymore, why then I could get on with it!" Now, you may not know this, but rabbits get sort of ornery when they get old, and this rabbit was really, really old. The man knew that about rabbits and so, he decided to play along as if everything were normal.

He nodded his head slowly, and kept right on whittling. Some strange things had already happened to him in his life and frankly, he just couldn't remember any reason why a rabbit shouldn't put out half his fire and then tell him a tale. And so the rabbit continued.

"I must tell you this tale, brother, because my time is drawing near and the things that I know should not be forgotten when I'm gone. You see, I'm not, really, a...normal, rabbit. In fact, I'm one of the very first rabbits ever born to this world. That means that I am very, very old and that I have seen many, many things, and known many glorious joys and painful sorrows.

"My tale starts when the world was still young and all the plants and animals were equals upon its surface. At that time, every decade, or ten years, we held a World Council of Living Things to which all the species would send one representative to debate the Great Questions in Life. For many decades, I proudly represented the rabbits of our world at the Council.

"On the year that my tale begins, a mushroom stepped forth at Council and told us that the mushroom people were upset because everyone called them 'plants' when in truth they weren't because they didn't do photosynthesis and weren't even green to begin with! What they wanted was a new name. Well, let me tell you, this started quite a debate! We didn't know if we should invent a new name for their type, or simply outlaw mushrooms

altogether to keep things simple! Turtle thought we should call them 'food' but the mushrooms were a little offended by that suggestion. Eventually, Rhino suggested we call them 'fungi' which everyone seemed to think was as good a name as any and so we voted it into the Law of the Land. With that, there was quite a lot of back-slapping and general good cheer for we all felt that we had solved yet another of the Great Mysteries of Life. But that has nothing to do with my tale.

"When the back-slapping died down and the tears of joy cleared from our eyes, we discovered that a new visitor had joined the World Council, and it was Fire, the High Spirit of the Sun. At that time, all the plants and animals fea...-- and fungi! -- feared Fire, for fire was rage and uncontrolled and wild and unpredictable and...well, and just plain HOT! So everyone took one giant step back. And then of course, we all took one giant forward again, picked up the plants and fungi who couldn't take their own steps, and then took a giant step back. And Fire said to us, 'Doo not Fearrr meee, my Brotherssss and SSSisssterssss. IIII come in Peeeaacce. I am Lonely and Tired of being Feared by All. I Wish to Join You in Your Joy. I Wish for You to Call Me Friend. And in Exchange, I will Work for You. I will Help You to Mold the Earth into Things You Need. I will Bring You Power and Comfort and other Greatness. If Only You will Call Me Friend.'"

At the campfire, the man moved a bit away from the flames before him, and stopped whittling his chips into the fire pit, for the words of the white rabbit ran a chill down the length of his human spine. The rabbit looked at him, wrinkled its nose once, and continued its tale.

"Well, it was clear to us all that Fire was sincere, and truly lonely.

But it was also clear that Fire was neither animal, nor plant, nor even fungus, and that the World Council of Living Things had no place for a thing which was not truly living, even if it was a High Spirit like Fire. For how could Fire debate the Great Questions of Life if it had no Life to begin with? Besides, being a High Spirit, Fire probably already knew many of the answers, and that would spoil our fun. Also, Fire was unpredictable and hot and very powerful. In the end, we decided that Fire would be better off staying with the other High Spirits and searching for its joy there. And so we voted against its proposal. But, because we felt badly for Fire (and I suppose because we feared It), we decided to assign one member species to be its Honorary Friend. Man volunteered and we gladly gave humans the job.

"The Council closed that year and we all trudged and flew and swam and slid and grew and were carried home with a Great Doubt in our Hearts, and a Fear at the Back of our Souls that none of us could explain.

"Decades rolled passed and became centuries. At that time, all the living things on this world were blessed with the magic of being able to live pretty much as long as we cared to. When finally the time came that we were satisfied with our lives, we would simply Give Up the Ghost, and leave our bodies behind to feed our friends and relatives. Some chose short lives while others lived on through the centuries. I chose to live on, for I cherished my work at the Council.

"As I said, centuries passed, and in those centuries, humans and Fire grew very close. Fire actually turned out to be a rather jolly sort.

In fact Fire and Humans became great friends, laughing and singing and spending most all their time together. But the union was not natural, for one was a Living Thing, and the other a High Spirit. Eventually, the other High Spirits expressed their concern, and suggested that Fire return to them. But they suggested too late, for Fire and Humans were such close friends they could not bear to part. At that point, Fire made a desperate decision that forever changed the World. Fire chose to give up the rank and priveledge of a High Spirit, so that it could live forever with its Friend, Human.

"Fire hoped that when it gave up being a High Spirit it would become a Living Thing -- maybe a great orange plant, or an animal with flowing orange fur, or an orange-colored fungus even, anything so long as it could stay with its friend Human. Alas. This was not so. For a High Spirit has no soul. At least not like yours or mine. And without a soul, how could a Thing ever be 'Living?'

"No, when Fire gave up being a High Spirit, it did not become a Living Thing. It became something else altogether. Something new.

Something we later called, a 'tool.' Do you know what a tool is?" the rabbit asked the man. "A tool is something that does not speak, and does not laugh and does not sing songs late into the night. In the years that followed, the Humans sat around their fires and spoke to them and sang to them but their fires could longer answer. And this brought the humans much sadness. Even today human people sit before fires and stare deeply into them, as if their old friend the High Spirit might suddenly speak, offering a joke or a song. A human with a fire never feels alone.

"But I was saying, Fire became a tool instead of a Living Thing. A tool is a thing that we use to make our work easier. At that time, humans didn't have any work to do. But suddenly they had a tool, so they invented work, and they did the things Fire originally told them they could do, hoping that by bringing the Dreams of Fire to Life, they might somehow restore the Life to their Friend Fire. And so they began to mold the Earth. They gathered the metals and molded them into more tools in the breath of their old friend, Fire. And with more tools they found more work and soon were too busy to attend the World Council of the Living Things.

"In the centuries that followed, the world began to change. Humans became powerful, for even as a tool, fire still offered Great Power.

With so much to think about, most Humans had stopped remembering how to speak with the rest of us and hear our voices. Travel for the other Living Things became difficult, and attendance at the World Council dwindled. At that time too, most of the oldest Living Things chose to die, and I became an 'old-timer.'

"At one of the last meetings of the World Council, the youngsters there decided to send a representative to the remaining one of the other High Spirits to ask for help in making Fire a High Spirit once again. They hoped that if Fire could laugh and sing with the Humans, then the humans would sit down, and abandon their work, and enjoy instead the company of their old friend. They chose me to go, since I was the old-timer and knew the way.

"So I set off on a long, long journey which took many, many years. I climbed the hills and swam the seas and slept quite a lot, for a rabbit my age needs its rest. Finally, I reached my goal, the top of the highest mountain peak in the world. And when I got there, I...lied down and slept for seven days and seven nights. I was tired!

"When I at last awoke, I rubbed my eyes, and stood up tall and proud, and spoke these words into the wind and the clouds that swirled about my perch. 'Wind,' I called, 'High Spirit of the Sky. I am a very old and humble rabbit who has come a very long way to humbly represent the living things of this humble world who humbly beg your audience on a very urgent matter.'

"I had rehearsed those words quite a lot, so they sounded magnificent as they rolled from my lips. Unfortunately there was no response. So I spoke them again, this time louder and prouder, but still no response. But, when I spoke them the third time I poured my very heart and soul into the words, and finally a breeze dropped from the sky and whistled down the tunnels of my very cold ears, and there I heard this response: 'Whiiiiite Raaabit... III am Wiiiiinnnd and I know why you have come...'"

At the campfire, a cool breeze slid from the sky and fanned the fire into a hot blaze. In its bright and flickering light, the man sat with his head bowed, feeling ashamed at the trouble his People had caused. The rabbit saw this, wrinkled its nose and wiggled its whiskers, and spoke to him.

"There is no shame in following a Dream," he said, "nor in longing for a lost Friend. Your People meant no harm. These things I know, for the Wind told them to me, and it told me much more as well. Our conversation lasted a long, long time and I learned quite a bit. But it's been so long now that I've forgotten most of what Wind told me.

"When the time came for me to leave Wind, the High Spirit granted me a gift, a Power. It told me that in honor of my courage and great services to the World, It would make my name a Word of Power. So that whenever I came to a fire burning, and spoke my own name, that fire would blow out, and the energy of that fire would travel to the home of the High Spirits. And each fire I so extinguished would send its power to that place until eventually enough power would gather that Fire could once more become a True High Spirit.

"And so I climbed down the peak and spent many centuries wandering this world and doing the bidding of Wind. Even today, when those who truly believe in the old ways speak even the words, 'White Rabbit' before a fire, a breeze will slide from the sky and blow the smoke from their eyes."

With that, the rabbit sat silent and half closed its eyes, absorbing the friendly warmth of the fire and the company of the bewildered man.

After a time, the man raised his head and said, "Rabbit, you said that your time is drawing near. I take it that means you will soon choose to die. Perhaps if you would tell me your true name, then I could carry on the work of Wind when you leave, and maybe bring back the laughter and song of Fire."

The Rabbit nodded slowly. "That would be a good thing," it said. "A very good thing indeed. But I'll tell you something, friend. To be honest, I've been wandering around this world for so very long that I've, well, sort of forgotten what my true name is...." For a moment, the two sat in a deep and sad silence. But soon, the man began to chuckle. He chuckled for he knew that he too had forgotten his own name and he saw the humor of their situation. Also, the man had learned to find the humor, the silver lining in every dark cloud, and to believe that there was always hope. The rabbit stared at him, feeling a little hurt for it thought that the man was laughing at its own foolishness. But presently, the joy of the man rose and spread to the rabbit's heart and it began chuckling as well. And the magic between them grew and spread until the very fire rose and crackled along with them. And the three...the three laughed long and hard as their souls entwined in the night.