

Woodland Justice

By Shirley Young

*"Don't gossip. Don't falsely accuse your neighbour of some crime..."
(Leviticus 19:16, The Living Bible).*

*"Do not pass along untrue reports..."
(Exodus 23:1, The Living Bible).*

*"An evil man sows strife; gossip separates the best of friends"
(Proverbs 16:28, The Living Bible).*



Far out in the countryside there was a wood known to local people as simply 'The Woodlands'. It covered a large area and was the home for many different types of animals and birds.

One autumn morning, when it was still early and a low mist blanketed the ground, Frank Fox, who had been out and about all night on his patrols, felt tired. So he decided to lie down in the long grass, intending to have a doze before continuing on to his lair.

However, as he lay there, the stillness of the early morning was suddenly broken by the sound of scurrying feet and the rustling of leaves. Frank's ears went up but he lay completely still, hidden from view. As his narrow slit eyes peered intently through the long grass, Frank saw Sammy Squirrel coming along the path. As he watched, Sammy hurried across to the big oak tree where Cyril Squirrel normally lived. Frank knew that Cyril was away from home and wondered what Sammy was doing.

As the fox watched, Sammy went to a concealed hollow in the side of the tree and pulled back some leaves and twigs that blocked it from view. He then bent down and pulled out a number of acorns and nuts from inside. Sammy picked up as many as he could carry, then replaced the leaf covering the opening, and hurried away.

All this time the fox had not moved or given away his presence. But Frank was now suspicious of Sammy, so he decided that he would come again the next day, hide in the same place, and watch to see what would happen.

Early the next morning, just as the fox had guessed, Sammy Squirrel came back to the oak tree, took some more nuts from Cyril's hiding place and scurried away with them.

When Sammy had repeated this routine for several mornings, Frank grinned cunningly to himself. He had never liked the squirrel and thought he now had the perfect opportunity to get Sammy into big trouble for stealing.

The fox knew that there were strict laws laid down in The Woodlands for the proper conduct of all the animals and birds. If anyone broke these laws they had to appear before the Woodlands court, which was presided over by a wise, but strict old Judge named Mr Owl. However, the owl was known to be very fair and just in all his judgements.

Of course Frank had frequently broken a number of these laws himself, but on this occasion he preferred not to remember that. He was just gleeful that he had something with which to accuse young Sammy. Sammy was altogether too 'righteous' for his taste and he longed to bring him down a peg or two. As a consequence, it wasn't long before Frank began a whispering campaign, accusing Sammy of stealing.

On his way home to his lair, Frank met the three Misses Mice coming out of the undergrowth. He quickly repeated to them what he had seen and was suitably gratified with their squeaks of indignation and shaking of heads.

As the mice scurried away, they met their friends Betty and Bunny Rabbit coming towards them. They stopped them excitedly and with great self-importance imparted the news that Sammy Squirrel was a thief! They

were thrilled to be the first with the news and to know something that the rabbits didn't know.

"I would never have believed it of Sammy!" exclaimed Betty Rabbit. "I can't imagine him stealing anything."

Nevertheless, when the rabbits met up with their friend, Hank Hare, they told him the story and so the gossip spread along the Woodlands grapevine.

Of course it wasn't very long before the two magpies, who were reporters for the weekly Woodland Herald, heard the gossip and scented a front page scoop for their newspaper.

The magpies knew they were prohibited by their editor, Carl Crow, from writing anything that might result in a libel case, but they contented themselves with writing vague articles about 'dark doings' in the Woodlands. They featured themselves as investigative reporters doing a service for the community.

In the meantime, poor Sammy Squirrel went blithely about his daily routine totally unaware of what was being said. He had, however, noticed that one or two of his friends gave him strange looks, and one had even turned the other way when he saw Sammy coming, but Sammy didn't understand why.

It wasn't long, however, before the horrible truth was brought home to him. As he prepared to leave his hollow tree one morning, he went outside and found a piece of paper nailed to the trunk of the tree. On it there was a crudely pencilled drawing of himself and, underneath that, the words: "A THIEF LIVES HERE!"

Sammy stared at it in disbelief. Then slowly he began to understand why his friends hadn't been speaking to him. Large tears filled his eyes as he ran back inside his home. Soon he was sobbing uncontrollably, not knowing what to do.

It was at this moment that an authoritative rap sounded on the trunk of his tree. "We know you're in there, Sammy, so it's no good trying to hide. Come out in the name of the law!" said a harsh voice.

Trembling with fear, Sammy peered outside to see Raymond and Reggie Rat, the two fearsome law officers of The Woodlands.

"We're taking you into custody," they said, "and anything you say will be taken down and used as evidence."

"But, but, on what charge? I haven't done anything wrong! I'm innocent," blurted out Sammy between his tears.

"Yeah, yeah, they all say that!" laughed Reggie nastily.

Feeling it was useless to argue, Sammy let himself be led along into the middle of the wood where Mr Justice Owl was in session.

Just as they arrived, a chastened Fred Ferret was being led away, having just been convicted of harassing two rabbits. Sammy glanced nervously around the clearing in the woodland and to his dismay saw that the public area was packed with animals sitting on the ground and that the tree branches were filled with birds. He was also horrified to notice that the two magpie reporters were present and were already eyeing him closely, taking note of his every expression.

"Next case," crowed the cockerel, who acted as the court usher and whose penetrating voice could be heard everywhere.

Sammy was led forward, flanked on either side by the two rats.

The Judge, Mr Justice Owl, was perched on a low over-hanging branch in the centre of the clearing. In his claws he held a small, stout stick like a gavel. As he rapped authoritatively on the branch, silence fell.

"Bring forward the accused," he intoned, as his great-all-seeing eyes stared down.

"What is your name young squirrel?"

"Sammy Squirrel, sir," Sammy faltered.

"You will address me as M' Lord," corrected the owl.

"Yes sir, 'em, M' Lord," replied Sammy nervously.

"And who is it that is accusing Sammy Squirrel and on what charge?" asked the Judge loudly.

Frank Fox stepped eagerly into the centre of the clearing, aware that all eyes were upon him. He enjoyed the limelight and was loving every minute of this.

In an attempt to ingratiate himself with the Judge, Frank gave a low deferential bow and began to explain how he had seen Sammy stealing the nuts and acorns belonging to Cyril Squirrel.

"Are there any other witnesses to this charge?" enquired the Judge.

"Oh no, M' Lord," said Frank importantly. "I'm the only one who saw the crime take place."

"I must remind you, Mr Fox," said the Judge, "that this is an *alleged* crime. The case has not yet been proven. And since you state that you are the only witness, it would seem to be the case of your word against Sammy Squirrel's. We cannot convict on the word of one witness without there being further substantial evidence."

The self-important smile was wiped off Frank's face. "But I did see him I tell you!" he burst out rudely. "He was loaded with nuts and acorns. I saw

it with my own eyes. His little paws were full of 'em. He took them again and again for several days in a row. I was watching and I know what I saw!"

Gasps, murmurs and mutterings broke out around the court.

"Silence!" thundered the Judge, banging his gavel on the tree bough. "If there is another outburst like this, I'll have the court cleared!"

A great hush followed as no one wanted to be sent from the court. They all wanted to hear every detail of the case.

"Sammy Squirrel," the Judge continued in a more moderate voice, "please step forward and answer the following questions:

"Were you aware that the one known as Cyril Squirrel was away from home?"

"Yes M' Lord," stammered Sammy in a frightened voice.

"And did you, on the days previously mentioned, remove articles of food from Cyril's winter storehouse?"

"Yes M' Lord I did, but I"

"Thank you," the Judge interrupted. "And did you remove these various food items to a secret location deeper in the heart of the wood?"

"Well, yes M' Lord, I did remove them, only I was going to"

"Thank you," interrupted the Judge again. "Since you admit that you knew Cyril was away from his home and that in his absence you did remove things of value from his winter store, perhaps you would please explain to the court WHY you took these things and what you intended to do with them. I should remind you, Sammy Squirrel, that you are required to speak the exact truth or you will be held in contempt of court. Speak up now!"

"Yes M' Lord, I always tell the truth. I will try to explain only I think . . ."

"I think that perhaps I could better explain the matter to the court's satisfaction," came a voice from the back of the clearing.

All heads turned to see who had spoken. As they watched, an elderly grey squirrel, who walked stiffly and slowly, came forward and stood before the Judge.

"And exactly who are you, sir?" enquired Judge Owl. "And what have you to do with this case?"

"I am Cyril Squirrel, M' Lord, and I am the owner of the property in question. I would like to give evidence in defence of my good friend, Sammy Squirrel."

"Don't you mean you wish to speak for the prosecution?" enquired the Judge frowning.

"No, M' Lord, I wish to speak in his defence."

"Very well. You may proceed," allowed the Judge.

The excited magpie reporters in the gallery leaned forward eagerly, their sharp eyes standing out on stalks as they strained to catch every word.

"As you can see M' Lord," began Cyril, "I'm quite elderly and I'm now finding it difficult to manage alone. So my two younger sisters, who live together at the farthest end of the wood, have invited me to go and live with them. And since I have great difficulty in walking, Sammy Squirrel very kindly offered to transport all my stored nuts and acorns through the length of the wood to where my sisters live. It will be much easier for me living there with my sisters and also there is a hazelnut orchard close by which will be convenient."

"Very convenient indeed!" murmured the Judge dryly.

A ripple of laughter went around the court. (The Judge never rebuked them when they laughed at his jokes!)

"So you see, M' Lord," concluded Cyril, "Sammy didn't steal anything. On the contrary, he was doing me a great service and kindness."

"If that is indeed the truth, then the case is dismissed," declared the Judge.

At these words, the birds and animals began to move about and chatter amongst themselves.

But Judge Owl was not finished and banged his gavel angrily. "You will kindly do me the courtesy of remaining seated until I have finished my concluding remarks!" he thundered sternly.

Silence fell as the animals shuffled shamefacedly back to their places.

"As you are well aware," resumed the Judge in a more moderate tone, "we have laws in the Woodland which if obeyed bring peace and harmony. If disobeyed, they result in suspicion, discord and chaos. I don't need to remind you that one such law is that *no one should go about spreading lies, gossip and rumour.*"

"Such behaviour can only create much hurt and damage," he continued. "It can ruin the reputation of an innocent person. No one should ever jump to hasty conclusions based on hearsay and tittle tattle. If you are ever in doubt about something, then report it to a responsible older member of the community and it will be brought to my attention for further investigation."

"I should also like to take this opportunity to remind the Woodland Herald that we expect high standards of reporting here. If there are any further libellous stories masquerading as 'service to the community' I shall take immediate steps to close the newspaper." This was said with a baleful

glare at Carl Crow, the Editor, and the two magpie reporters, who seemed to shrink in size under the owl's penetrating stare.

"And as for you, Frank Fox," continued the Judge, "I sentence you to two weeks community service for wasting the court's time! Mr Rat, take him away!"

Throwing a sullen look in the direction of the Judge, Frank Fox was hustled from the court.

"Finally, I should like to highly commend Sammy Squirrel for his unselfish kindness to a disabled member of our community. You would do well to copy his fine example. Court dismissed."

And with these final words, Judge Owl soared up and away on his great wings and disappeared above the tree tops.

Quietly and somewhat guiltily the animals melted away into the wood.

Sammy Squirrel, dazed and weak with relief, slumped to the ground. Seeing this, a motherly squirrel by the name of Hazel Nutkin, hustled over to him. "Come along now, Sammy" she said kindly. "It's all over now. Why don't you run along home and have a good night's sleep. I'll stop by and see you tomorrow."

Sammy realised this was good advice, so he slowly and thoughtfully rose to his feet and made his way home. It wasn't very long before he was fast asleep inside the hollow of his tree. Sammy slept so soundly and deeply that it was late the following morning when he awoke to hear a knocking and hammering on the trunk of his tree.

"Oh it's that noisy woodpecker again!" he thought sleepily, and was about to drift back into sleep when he heard a voice calling his name. "Sammy! Are you in there? Wake up!"

Recognising the voice, Sammy jerked upright and scampered outside to greet his old friend Cyril Squirrel.

"At last!" laughed Cyril. "Waking you is like trying to rouse the dead!"

Sammy grinned sheepishly.

"I just stopped by to thank you again for all your help and to say how sorry I am that it got you into so much trouble. Also, my sisters have insisted that I invite you to come and eat with us tomorrow evening. They are preparing a special feast and you are to be guest of honour! I happen to know that for starters we are going to have a most delicious mix of grubs, maggots, beetles and insects. Then we are to have juicy slugs covered in chopped nuts, followed by fruit."

Sammy's eyes grew round as his mouth watered in anticipation. "Oh thank you," he gasped. "I'll definitely be there."

Cyril smiled broadly and patted Sammy kindly on the head. Then he called out a cheery, "See you tomorrow evening," and walked stiffly away.

Sammy watched him go and then lightly scampered into his favourite position on a broad bough of his tree.

As he sat there dreaming in the warm sunshine, he began imagining the wonderful food that he would be having the next day, and thought too of the kind words spoken of him by stern old Judge Owl. Everything was right again in Sammy's world. Justice had been done.

The End

