

fiction by ROBERT F. YOUNG

Did you ever see a tree walking?

Wesley went back to work with enthusiasm. He didn't care if the job took two days—even three. What a crazy way to meet a girl!

There she lay, so beautiful that he could not turn his eyes away; and he stooped down and gave her a kiss. But as soon as he kissed her, Briar-rose opened her eyes and awoke, and looked at him quite sweetly.

—Grimm's Household Tales; *Little Briar-rose*

IT never entered Wesley Norton's head the morning he climbed into the branches of the big silver maple in front of Dominic DelPopolo's delicatessen that he was going to see Sleeping Beauty. That's the way it usually is when fairy tales come into our lives.

It was Wesley's job to top the tree in such a manner that it could be felled without tak-ing the electric wires that ran through its foliage down with it and without damaging the brand-new sign that graced the countenance of the store and that said, in big neon--veined letters: DOMINIC DELPOPOLO'S DELICATESSEN. This, as can readily be imagined, was a task of considerable magni-tude, and Wesley, whose applied tree-removal experience dated from June 1 when he'd graduated from tree school to July 22, which this very morning had warmly ushered in, was uncomfortably aware of the fact. However, there was no way he could get out of it since Herb, the foreman, was too fat too climb any more and Wilkes, the key man, was home celebrating his brother's wedding. As for Harris, the remaining member of the crew, he had even less tree-removal experience than Wesley did. Besides, what has all this got to do with Sleeping Beauty anyway?

Plenty, because if the circumstances had been different, it might have been someone less amenable to fairy tales than Wesley Norton who climbed the rope to the first limb of the silver maple that morning and looked through the third-floor window of the delicatessen building and saw this dark-haired damsel sleeping on a snow-white bed.

Unlike the Prince, Wesley did not have to kiss his little Briar-rose to awaken her. The very intensity of his gaze did the trick. And, unlike the Bewitched Maiden, she did not "look at him quite sweetly" when

she opened her eyes. As a matter of fact she stared at him as though he were an escaped orang-outang, and jumped out of bed and pulled down the shade. Well, you could hardly blame her, could you?

Wesley stood up on the limb and steadied himself against the trunk. What a crazy way to meet a girl! He'd have to find some way to apologize to her. Maybe she worked in the delicatessen; if so, when noon came he could go in and buy a pint of milk to go with his lunch, and if the opportunity afforded, tell her he was sorry.

He put her out of his mind for the moment and looked at the limb. It was a big one, but happily the electric wires were above it, so there wouldn't be any need to rope it and pull it back against the trunk. Below him, Herb was standing on the sidewalk, talking to Mr. DelPopolo, and Harris was standing on the curb, chewing gum and watching the cars go by. For all the weight Herb had put on, he was still on the lanky side, and in juxtaposition with Mr DelPopolo, who was short and stocky, he actually looked thin.

The morning breeze wafted the tailend of their conversation up to Wesley's ears. "Don't worry about the sign, Mr. DelPopolo," Herb was saying. "Nothing's going to happen to it."

"Just the same," Mr. DelPopolo said, "I tell you to be careful. Once in Sicily I climb the tree and cut the branch. I know."

He turned and re-entered the store, sidling past a short dark-haired woman as rotund as he was stocky who was standing in the door-way. Mrs. DelPopolo, Wesley guessed; and guessed, too, from the dour expression on her face, that all was not well in the Del-Popolo menage.

"How's it look, Wes?" Herb called up.

"Not bad," Wesley said. "I'm going to drop the first one straight down."

He rigged himself a saddle and told Harris to send up the chain saw. The limb came off fine. It made an awful crash, though, when it hit the pavement between the two lines of cars Herb and Harris had flagged down, and Mr. and Mrs. DelPopolo and Sleeping Beauty came streaking out of the delicatessen like three bees out of a hive. Mr. DelPopolo didn't even bother to look at the limb: He looked up at the sign instead, and his sigh of relief was audible all the way up to the crotch where Wesley was standing. Mrs. DelPopolo looked up at the sign, too, but if she was relieved to see it still shining in the sun, her dour countenance did not register the fact.

Wesley got the next limb off without any trouble, too. And the next and the next. By the time noon came he was feeling pretty proud of himself, and he burned down in his saddle with the best of them "Be right with you," he told Herb. "I'm going to get a pint of milk."

The interior of the store had a bright new look. Sleeping Beauty had a bright new look, too, as she came through the living-quarters doorway. Her black hair, freshly combed, fell to her shoulders, and a pink rose that matched the hue of her cheeks, rode its lustrous waves.

"Hello," Wesley began, "I—" and that was as far as he got.

"I'm *not* a Peeping Tom," he interrupted her presently. "It's my *job* to climb trees!"

"Is it your job to look in windows, too?"

"I couldn't help it. I just raised my eyes and there you were."

"You didn't have to *stare!*"

"I didn't mean to stare. It was just one of those things. Anyway, I apologize, and now if you'll get me a pint of milk, I won't bother you any more."

She got the milk out of a gleaming new refrigerator and set it on the counter. Wesley paid her. "Is there a place around here where we can eat our lunch?" he asked.

"There's a picnic table out in back, but you better ask pop first."

"Never mind ask *him!* Eat at the table if you like."

Mrs. DelPopolo had appeared in the living-quarters doorway. Now she advanced to the counter, tore a small piece of wrap-ping paper from the roll and scribbled some-thing on it with a soft-lead pencil. She folded it and handed it to Sleeping Beauty. "Give to him, Angelica," she said. She regarded Wesley with enigmatic eyes. "You eat at the table, yes?"

"Yes," Wesley said. "Thank you, Mrs. DelPopolo."

The table was a big home-made one and stood in the shade of a pear tree. The back-yard was big,

too, and bordered with flowers. After they stowed away their lunch they sat around and smoked till 12.30, then headed back for the tree. Mrs. DelPopolo popped out on the back porch just as they were passing and beckoned to Wesley.

She looked him up and down after he climbed the steps. "You are the one who cuts off the top of the tree?" she asked.

When Wesley nodded, she pulled a wilted wad of bills out of her apron pocket and leaned close to him. "You know the sign in the front?"

Wesley said he did.

She leaned even closer. She lowered her voice. "When you cut the biggest limb, you drop it right on the sign, yes?"

Wesley stared at her. "But why?" he said, when he found his voice.

Little sparks appeared in her dark brown eyes. "My husband, great big shot he is! *Dominic* DelPopolo, he has the sign say. Not *Dominic* and *Margherita* DelPopolo. And so everybody can see what great big shot *he* is, he spend \$300 to cut down the tree! You let the limb fall, like accident, yes?"

"But—but I couldn't do that," Wesley said. "It—it would be unethical. And I'd probably lose my job."

One by one, the little 'sparks went out. Slowly she returned the wad of bills to her apron pocket. "I no want to see you lose your job," she said.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. DelPopolo," Wesley said. He descended the steps and walked away.

He saw the way it probably was with them, and he thought about it all afternoon, working in the tree: The two of them, young and newly married, coming over from Sicily and settling in Tompkinsville and starting a business of their own; working day and night through the years, sharing the burden together; arriving finally at the time when the figures in their bank account justified remodelling and made possible the realization of the glorious dream of having their names in neon light for the whole wide world to see. And then.—Mr. DelPopolo's perfidy. . .

It was hot in the tree and around 3 o'clock Herb told him to come down and take a break. Wesley said he'd take it in the tree instead and, ensconcing himself on a wide limb, he leaned back against the trunk and lit a cigaret. Presently he heard the tinkle of ice cubes and, looking down, he saw Angelica coming out of the store with a big pitcher of lemonade and a tray of glasses.

"Aren't you coming down now, Wes?" Herb hollered.

"No, wait," Angelica called up. "I'll hand you yours through the window."

Both of them had to stretch a little to make it, but the transference was achieved admirably, and their hands touched for one of those brief moments so popular with poets. "Thanks," Wesley said.

"You're welcome."

She looked more like Sleeping Beauty than ever, with her elbows propped on the window-sill and her pretty face cupped in her hands. Suddenly Wesley understood that this was her way of telling him that she had accepted his apology, and a warmth that had nothing to do with the summer sun coursed through him. "Did mom try to bribe you?" she asked.

He hesitated a moment, then nodded.

"I was afraid she would. Honestly, you never saw anyone like them—they're just like a couple of kids. If I wasn't around to carry their notes back and forth, I don't know what they'd do. Now she's threatening to leave him and go back to Sicily, and she's just stubborn enough to go through with it!"

“WHY didn't he have her name put on the sign, too?" Wesley asked.

"I think he kind of got carried away. For a long time they thought they could never have children, and then, when they finally did have the only one they could ever have, it was me. So in a way, the sign is his bid for immortality, and I guess he was so eager to see his name in lights that it probably never occurred to him that mom might like to see hers, too. And when she got mad at him, his only defence was to get mad back."

Wesley handed her his empty glass and their hands touched again. He went back to work with an

enthusiasm hitherto alien to him, and the chain saw sang almost without interruption for the remainder of the after-noon. There was still a lot of the tree left by the time 5 o'clock came around, though. Another day's topping, at least. But Wesley wouldn't have minded if there'd been two days topping left. Even three. He was no longer the same young man who had climbed into the branches that morning, and after they drove back to the Hotel Tompkinsville where they were staying (first storing the chain saw, the crosscut and the bull rope in Mr. DelPopolo's shed where they'd be safer than in the truck), he sang all through his shower and all the while he shaved.

The second day of the silver maple was significant on two counts: It was the day Wesley rose to new heights as a treeman and it was the day he made his first date with Sleeping Beauty.

Herb looked the tree over when Wesley descended after making the final cut. It was not a pleasant sight to the non-professional eye, with its stubs jutting this way and that and the whole top of it cut off; but to a tree-man's eye, it was a thing of beauty and could not fail to fall, when notched and crosscut properly, on an angle away from the store that would clear the sign nicely. "Yes sir," Herb said for the 10th time, "you did all right, Wes. You did all right." Then: "Well, we might as well put the tools in the shed, take our load of brush up to the dump and call it a day. We'll drop her tomorrow morning. Harris, take that lemonade pitcher and those glasses back in the store."

"I'll take them back in," Wesley said, almost knocking Harris down.

"Hi," Angelica said, when he came in the door.

"Hi," Wesley said. "I missed you at the window today."

"I had to go downtown this afternoon so I had mom make the lemonade. Was it good?"

"Not as good as yours." Wesley paused, took a deep breath. "I've—I've got kind of a beat-up old Pontiac," he said. "But it runs. Would—would you like to go for a ride tonight?"

"Pick me up at 8," she said.

Just like that. He couldn't get over it.

It was a warm summer's night, and they rode with the windows down. He drove up into the hills above Tompkinsville up and up till they could look down and see the lights of the town and the lights of the towns around it, and the highway lights dot-dotting the dark distances in between. He found a little road that wound through woods and meadows and climbed into the sky, and he drove up it and parked at the pale feet of the stars. The moon came up and hung like a ripe peach in the black branches of the night.

He put his arm around little Briar-rose and kissed her, and he felt the stirring in her breast and heard the frenzied rustling of witches' skirts in the darkness. She must have felt the stirring, too, and heard the rustling, for she drew abruptly away. Presently she said, "It's a lovely night."

"Yes," he said.

"Will you be going away tomorrow after you cut the tree down?"

"Yes," he said again.

"When you cut it down will you make it fall against the sign?"

He sat very still in the starlight. "No," he said, after a while.

"Mom's all packed and ready to leave him. And he's too proud to back down. Will you make it fall against the sign?"

"No," he said again.

"All you'd have to do would be to notch it a certain way."

"No," he said. And then: "Is that the reason you said yes so quick when I asked you for a date?"

"Part of the reason," she said. "Will you do it? Please?"

"No," he said, "I can't. Don't you see how unfair it would be to the people I work for? How unfair it would be to the company that carries our insurance?"

"Yes," she said, moving away from him and sitting up straight on the seat. "I see. I see a lot of things. I think it's time you took me home."

"All right," he said, "if that's the way you want it."

They rode in silence now. They had ridden in silence before, but then the silence had been warm. Now it was cold. He let her out in front of the delicatessen by the branch-denuded tree. "Good night," he

said.

“Good night.”

He stopped in the hotel bar for a beer. *La Belle au Bois Dormant*, he thought. She pricked her finger on a spindle and fell asleep for a hundred years; and the horses went to sleep in the stable, the dogs in the yard and the pigeons upon the roof . . . and in front of the castle there began to grow a silver maple, which every year became and higher, and finally the Prince came in his Pontiac, unaware that a complication had been added to the plot. A complication in the form of a sign. . . .

The third day of the silver maple dawned bright and clear, and the still unscathed letters of the sign were ablaze with the light of the rising sun when Herb pulled up to the curb by the doomed tree. "You operate the truck, Wes," he said. "Harris and I will drop her."

Harris got the buff rope out of the Del-Popolo shed while Herb was throwing a climbing rope over one of the stubs. Then Harris went up and half-hitched one end of the bull rope around the trunk, after which he descended and tied the other end around the rear axle of the truck. Wesley pulled ahead till the rope was taut, then he sat in the cab, smoking.

PRESENTLY the thud of the axe sinking into the trunk reached his ears. He could see Harris in the rear-view mirror, swinging lustily away. Bending forward, he discovered that he could see almost the whole tree in the mirror. He frowned. For some reason it didn't look quite the way he remembered it from last night.

After Harris finished the notch, Herb went in the store to clear everybody out. It was a precaution you had to take even when you were sure of the direction of your fall. After a moment Mr. and Mrs. DelPopolo emerged and stood by the curb some distance down the street, and a few seconds later Angelica joined them. Herb brought up the rear.

When the crosscut began to sing, Wesley pulled the truck ahead a little more, tightening the bull rope still further; then he set the emergency brake and got out and stood on the running board. He looked at Angelica, but her attention was pre-empted by the tree. Miserably, he turned away. At length, the first faint crack of the coming fall rode the morning wind, and he climbed back into the cab, released the brake and took up a steady strain on the rope.

CRACK!

And there she goes, Wesley thought sadly. There goes my Sleeping Beauty tree. . . .

Abruptly the truck leaped ahead. Realizing what had happened, he switched the ignition, set the brake and jumped out; but the tree was on its way now, the broken bull rope dangling wildly from its neck, and there was nothing he or anyone else could do.

To him, trees always seemed to bow when they fell—as though they were saying fare-well to the sun and the wind and the rain. This one was bowing, too, and even in its finest hour it was betraying its innate respect for man by bowing in the pre-ordained direction. No, not quite—

Seemingly it was developing a mind of its own. It had broken free from the stump, and now it was turning . . . twisting . . .

Walking? . . .

Open-mouthed, Wesley watched it pirouette in the single step necessary to sideswipe the sign and scatter the words DOMINIC DELPOPOLO'S DELACATESSEN, to the four winds, and then crash magnificently to the sidewalk.

There was a final poignant tinkle as the last of Mr. DelPopolo's immortality broke free from the wiring and shattered on the concrete. Reluctantly, Wesley raised his eyes. Herb was standing on the curb, his arms hanging limply from their sockets. Harris' jaws were frozen in the act of coming together on his gum. But Mrs. DelPopolo's face looked as though a sunrise were taking place in her heart, and Angelica was smiling and crying simultaneously. Mr. DelPopolo was the only one as yet who had found his voice, and was making maximum use of it. "That's the way it goes," he was saying. "You got to take the sour with the sweet." And then: "Come on, everybody. Into the house. The wine is on Dominic DelPopolo!" All the while he talked, he kept shrugging his shoulders philosophically . . .

A little too philosophically, Wesley thought. . . .

The living-room was a large one, but with so many people crowded into it, it seemed small. The wine was Mr. DelPopolo's best. He filled glasses all around from a big pitcher. "Drink, everybody. Drink to Dominic DelPopolo's good sportsmanship!" Suddenly he grabbed Mrs. DelPopolo around the waist and kissed her. "And drink to my Margherita, too!"

Wesley watched him closely. Suddenly a squad of words crept out of the forest of his subconscious and crossed the clearing of his thoughts: Once in Sicily I climb the tree and cut the branch. I know.

MR. DELPOPOLO was standing before him now, waving the pitcher. Wesley held forth his glass and Mr. DelPopolo poured. Their eyes met. "You've got sawdust in your hair. Mr. DelPopolo." Wesley said.

A sick look settled on Mr. DelPopolo's countenance. Abruptly he leaned forward, lowered his voice. "Do not tell them, please. I will not collect one penny of the insurance, I promise you. I will pay for the new sign myself and buy you a new cow rope. You will not tell them, yes?"

"I will not tell them, no. But I will tell Herb that the rope probably got frayed on one of the saws."

The smile that had so precipitately departed from Mr. DelPopolo's face returned with a rush, and he was off again, waving the pitcher and shouting, "Wine, wine, every-body. Drink!"

Presently Wesley realized that there was someone standing at his elbow. "I heard him last night outside my window," Angelica said, her lips close to his ear. "Putting up the ladder and sawing. But I didn't let on. It was the only way he could back down and still save his pride."

"In Sicily he must have been quite a tree-man, to be able to throw a tree off balance as perfect as that," Wesley said. He shook his head. "A better treeman than *I'll* ever be."

She led him into the kitchen. A sad little cloud crossed her face. "I suppose you'll be leaving tonight," she said.

The setting wasn't strictly according to Grimm, but he stooped down and gave her a kiss anyway: This time she really woke up. And so did he.

"Yes," he said, "but I'll be coming back."

—And the horses in the courtyard stood up and shook themselves; the hounds jumped up and wagged their tails; the pigeons upon the roof pulled out their heads from under their wings, looked round, and flew into the open country—

If you should happen to drive through Tompkinsville some day, you can see the new sign for yourself. But the essence of immortality has no more to do with neon than it has to do with names, and the sign does not read quite the way you'd think. It does not say "Dominic's and Margherita's" delicatessen; it says "Angelica's and Wesley's" instead. . . .

It could just as well say "Sleeping Beauty and the Prince."