

# LO, HOW AN OAK E'ER BLOOMING

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*The power of faith is not to be underestimated. Science is often confronted with things—with recovery from incurable diseases, with events that run counter to prediction, with such items as Charles Fort or Immanuel Velikovsky drag out into the light that confound conservative scientists. Here's a story of a miracle that may or may not be scientifically explained.*

The day that she caused the miracle, Willow Severty was just plain tired. The women in the audience had been thrashing her a good half hour, and she'd been patiently bearing that, working away one word at a time toward somehow making them understand. But they were angry, at her and at the world, and they would not let Willow be. And when words failed her, Willow turned in utter weariness to deeds. One deed, to be precise.

She stood there sagging under the lash of their tongues, looking more and more battered and useless every minute. And then she gave herself a sort of shake, the way a tired animal will shake off water, and she raised her two hands before her to ward the other women off.

"That's enough," she said, standing there at the front of the room before the rows of chairs, beside the speaker's lectern. "That's more than enough. I'm sorry you're so dissatisfied with me, but I can't do any better. And I tell you you're wrong, with that laundry list of yours. I tell you there've been laws written down since first men could record their wickedness and their pride—and there has always been a way to make those laws no more than chicken scratches. Laws are like wars—of their making there is no end, and they're not worth warm spit. I tell you, what we need is a *miracle*."

They would have interrupted her if she'd paused, and she knew that, so she went right on.

"A miracle!" Willow said again. "Something that money and power and law and science and war *cannot do*. I've had enough of words—they ignore words anyway—it's time now for *signs*. Signs and portents. We need a miracle to show them. . . ." And she had smiled an exhausted smile and added, "Just a very small miracle will do. It doesn't have to be the levitation of the Pentagon. It will be sufficient if—Willow looked around her, and out over their heads toward the windows at the back of the conference room, and she saw something that would serve her purpose. "It would be sufficient for that bare oak tree, standing out there naked in the snow, to burst all at once into glorious bloom. That would be miracle enough."

And she had drawn a deep breath, and it was so.

Well. It isn't every day that a big oak flowers in the middle of deep winter, or any other time. *This* flowering was preposterous; it offended all the sensibilities. The experts came in twos and threes—the botanists and the biologists and the linear and nonlinear dynamicists and the horticulturists and even the physicists. When the careful dissection of one of the perfect yellow blooms, as big as a teacup, proved beyond any question that it was indeed a real flower, a genuine plant form growing, and not—as they had first assumed—a creation of plastic or silk or some other man-made substance, there were cautious articles in the scholarly journals about the matter. With photographs of cross sections of the blossom and its parts under the microscope, from a variety of angles and points of view. The botanists, who'd been rather out of it the past decade or so, preened themselves in the center circle of scientific attention and faced the difficult questions.

"What *is* it, exactly?"

"An anomaly," they said solemnly.

"What *are* those flowers?"

"We don't know. Sorry."

"Well, how could such a thing *be*?"

"We don't know that either. That is the nature of an anomaly."

No one among the experts could explain why, when you took one golden flower from the tree, another formed immediately to take its place. They were soon sorry they had even mentioned that, because it drew great crowds of people determined to take home an armful of the wonderful blooms for themselves, and it became necessary to set up a permanent security guard around the oak, and build a ten-foot-tall steel chain-link fence and a small guardhouse, and set a Doberman loping along the perimeter of the secured area.

The media were less cautious than the scientists. The *National Enquirer* had a headline half a page high shrieking "ROSES BLOOM ON WINTER OAK! BISHOPS DECLARE MIRACLE!" Not that the blossoms were roses, or any other flower identifiable by man, but it was close enough. It conveyed the sense of the situation.

The commercial interests were not cautious either. By the end of the first week, even as the fence was still going up in the muddy trampled snow, there were hot dog stands and coffee-and-dough-nut wagons. And there were souvenir vendors selling plastic oaks with yellow plastic flowers in a wide range of sizes, with a small plaque at the base reading "Replica of the Miracle Oak" in Gothic letters.

The churches were at first not only interested but eager. Miracles are not all that common, and a miracle that would go on twenty-four hours a day, standing up sturdily to every variety of scientific investigation, could not be said to exist anywhere else in the world today. But after the first wave of theologians and evangelists had spoken with Willow Severty, the churches drew back, bruised into a confused and uneasy silence.

The facts appeared to be beyond dispute; there had been forty-three witnesses inside the room when Willow called for that oak to bloom in the snow, and another dozen passersby outside who could not possibly be claimed to have been subject to mob hysteria. The women in the room agreed unanimously that when they had turned to look where Willow was looking, the tree had been there before their eyes in its full blazing glory of golden flowers. And the people outside were in full agreement—one minute there'd been an oak there, bare and black like any other February oak; and then, all of an instant, the tree had been covered branch after branch with flowers. The people persisted, despite the scientists, in calling the flowers roses. There seemed to be no question but that Willow Severty had called those roses forth.

And so the churchmen went to Willow prepared to be reverent, prepared to find *her* reverent, and they came away in great confusion. The woman was not a Catholic, she was not a Baptist, she was not even a Christian! The sudden hopes of the Jews, the Muslims, the Druids, the Wiccans—the list was endless—were promptly dashed; Willow Severty accepted no denomination of any known religion.

"Do you believe in God?" they asked her, and she smiled at them and went on knitting. When they insisted on an answer, Willow looked up with obvious distaste and said, "Well, would you prefer to think I did it all by *myself* gentlemen?" And she grinned in a way that offended them mightily, and added, "Or maybe you'd prefer to say the devil did it?"

The idea that Evil might have power sufficient to set that golden-flowered oak in the snow and maintain it there was simply not tolerable. They writhed under the notion, and rejected it for the sake of their sanity. On the other hand, the idea that this unprepossessing female, dumpy and middle-aged and badly dressed, had managed to call forth a miracle without assistance from any organized system of religious doctrine was also intolerable. Of course she had not done it herself; that was silly. But Whom had Willow Severty called upon?

They demanded to know if she could do it again, and she did laugh at them then.

"Gentlemen," she said, "can you do it *once*?"

And when they admitted that they could not, she told them she would wait. "You do it once," she said, "and then we'll see if I can do it twice."

They called her impudent, and blasphemous, and she laid it out for them. "You can't do it," she said. "Not for any amount of money. Not with the most powerful weapon in your arsenals. Not with the most advanced of your technologies. Not with all your mighty faiths combined. Perhaps it's time you reconsidered the value of all those things, gentlemen."

And the oak went right on blooming.

Seedlings came up around its base and were taken away in armored cars to be planted in greenhouse laboratories—where they died at once. Planted outside, set in carefully guarded circles of earth, they died equally promptly. Subjected to grafting, subjected to layering, subjected to cloning, subjected to techniques so advanced that they were military secrets—they died. Every attempt to produce or reproduce them failed. When the time came for acorns, the oak had them in abundance, side by side with the steadfast flowers, but dissection and analysis showed the acorns to be only the ordinary acorns of ordinary oaks; and seedlings forced from those acorns were ordinary seedlings. It might be a century before those seedlings burst into flower, if indeed that was what they were destined someday to do.

It wasn't enough to say, "Oh, it's just a new species of oak, which flowers when it grows to a certain age." Because it was much worse than that; it violated every natural law. There were plants known to grow with nearly miraculous speed, other and entirely acceptable plants. But there is no plant that bears flowers that never were buds and that never fade or fall; there are no *changeless* plants. True, if you took a bloom away from the oak, it faded and died like any flower fades and dies; but so long as the flowers were left on the tree, they were immune to all natural processes. High winds did not shake them loose; searing heat did not make them limp or brown the edges of their petals; the bitterest cold in no way altered their texture or fragrance. A laser would burn one away, as would a torch; but however many you burned (subject the entire time to furious shouts from worshipers demanding that you cease your desecration), another perfect flower would form to replace the burned ones the moment you set the implement of destruction aside. And it was the same with chemicals, with electric currents, with sound waves, with every mechanism the experts could devise. They were afraid to try a nuclear weapon, right there in the middle of Madison, Wisconsin, but they had no reason to think the results of such a trial would have been any different.

Pressed for comment, Willow Severty said, "Well, loving kindness, what you all call 'grace,' is like that. The more you use it, the more of it there is." And she went back to her struggle to make ends meet, while the scientists applied for ever larger grants to study the oak tree.

Some of the women found it strange that the offers made to Willow in the first few days—the book contracts, the movie and television contracts, the proposals for Willow Severty dolls and lunch boxes and bumper stickers and coffee mugs—were all withdrawn before Willow could decide whether any of them were worth signing.

Willow didn't find it strange. She had been a little surprised that the media hoopla had been allowed to continue as long as it had, once it became obvious that the oak was no seven-day wonder but proposed to *endure*. And as the day approached that would mark the one-year anniversary of the miracle, Willow bought a ticket on the Greyhound bus and took her knitting and withdrew as quietly as she could to a place where nobody would expect her to go. Willow had good sense, and endless patience; she went to the slums of Detroit.

What are we going to *do*?"

The question hovered like a banner in the air, over the heads of the assembled members of Project Bad Oak. They would have been pleased if an answer had hovered too, but there was no answer.

Everything had been tried, and everything had failed. The woman Willow Severty had brought the oak tree upon the world, and no amount of money or force of technology had proved adequate to duplicate or explain away what she had done. A steady pressure on the channels for dissemination of information had purged them of all mention of the miracle or its worker, but that was not going to be enough.

The tree was still *there*. It still *loomed*. Anyone who chose to go to Madison, Wisconsin, could see that for himself. The deadly chemicals injected into the tree's roots by stealth, in the dead of night, had had no effect at all. Sound waves, microwaves, electric shocks, salt—yes, salt, at the suggestion of an agent who knew what salt did to otherwise indestructible purple thistles on his farm—all had failed to bother the tree. It could be described only *as flourishing*.

And the people talked. In a variety of languages and social dialects, they talked, but they were all saying the same thing in the end: "Huh *You* can't *do* that, can you? Damn straight, you can't!" People, the mass of people, were snickering.

Church attendance had fallen off, as had college enrollments and enlistments in the military. Registrations to vote were down by several percent, as were crimes of violence and hospitalizations. Physicians were reporting a decline in number of patients seen; retail sales were off just a tad; lawyers languished for lack of altercations. It was all small numbers, and any one of these taken by itself would not have been worth noticing. But as a general and pervasive trend, it was serious.

"Gentlemen," said the secretary of defense, "what we are seeing is the steady growth of a nationwide disrespect for all the institutions of our society. *Something must be done.*"

"But how the hell did—"

"Never mind how!" hissed the secretary of defense. "We don't *know* how, and we don't have time to worry about it. Willow Severty told that gaggle of hysterical feminists that a flowering oak tree was all they needed to make us look pathetic. And she was *right*." "We can't start what she started, we can't do what she did, and we look like impotent asses. We look like *wimps*. We have to stop it, before it gets out of hand. And because what we're dealing with here is not civilized or decent, but is primitive superstition, we cannot allow the first anniversary of Willow Severty's so-called miracle to arrive. We *cannot* allow that kind of symbol to be created in the public mind."

"Why *so-called* miracle, Mister Secretary?" asked the priest who sat there as representative of religion.

"Oh, shut up, Father," said the rest of the men, and he did. It was hard to be strong from a position of total bewilderment. The priest was *absolutely* certain that God Almighty Himself had set that tree aflame and kept it so, but *why*? Why would He play so monstrous a joke upon His faithful, and for so *long*? And why had He not ended it in response to the thousands of contemplative religious praying round the clock these past six months for Him to do so? It was whispered that in the church that an abbe~~s~~—an abbe~~s~~! —had been heard to say, "Be not afraid; God is not mocked." .... Oh, yeah?" The good father shuddered, and he crossed himself discreetly.

"Well, what do you propose we *do*?" Half a dozen of the officials present asked the same question as if they had rehearsed, all of them sounding fretful, as befit the powerful made to look foolish by the powerless.

"We're going to cut the godforsaken cursed oak tree *down!*" declared the secretary of defense, and the priest crossed himself again, too horrified at the "godforsaken" and the "cursed" to concern himself about discretion.

"That's *all*?" asked a much-decorated general in the silence. "Just cut it down?"

"Well . . . not quite all," admitted the secretary. "A story has been leaked to the press and will be appearing tomorrow. . . . It seems the tree has been discovered to be giving off powerful carcinogens into the air." He glanced at a three-by-five card in his hand and began reeling off the statistics. Leukemias, up 40 percent in Madison. Cancer of the breast, up 80 percent. Cancer of the uterus and cervix, up 60 percent. Cancer of—"

"We follow you, Mister Secretary," observed the general. "Who's breaking the story?"

"The *Washington Post*, CBS News, and *Reader's Digest*. And the *National Enquirer*."

"Dear heaven, they'll call it witchcraft!" objected the priest.

"So?" the secretary of defense sneered. "Let them. We will have *stopped* it, Father."

"Are you sure?"

"You betcha. Unless someone here can convince me that there's one good reason to do otherwise—and it will take some doing, gentlemen, I warn you—at precisely 0200 tomorrow morning, that tree will be cut to the ground, incinerated to the last centimeter of its smallest twig and root, and the ground where it grew will be sterilized. And after *that*, my friends, we will pave the entire area over, right out to the perimeter, and put up a Kentucky Fried Chicken place where the tree used to be. Madison, Wisconsin can use another fried-chicken place. And another parking lot."

He shuffled his three-by-five cards, raised his eyebrows, and waited. And then he said, "Well? Does this mean nobody intends to argue?"

Six months earlier, they might have argued. The scientists would have demanded more time to study the phenomenon. The representatives of the humanities might have pleaded for restraint in the face of such magnificence, for awe in the presence of such mystery. The men from business and industry might have hesitated—there is something about an apparently inexhaustible resource that might, under adequate controls and in the proper hands, repay further investigation. And so on. But now they were wiser men, even the men of the cloth, and they knew a menace when they saw one a-blooming. They offered no objections.

At two o'clock in the morning, the surrounding population already evacuated by grim law-enforcement and emergency personnel announcing a life-threatening emergency that could not be explained for lack of time, it began. A crew of men who were more uncomfortable than they would have been willing to admit cut and burned the oak, flat to the ground. A bulldozer made certain no least thread of a root was left, turning the ground over not once but three times, at the direct order of the Department of Defense, although the source of the order for public information was the EPA. A sterilizing substance was spread over the barren earth, and a concrete mixer brought in and parked at the ready on the site. When dawn broke over Madison, Wisconsin, the morning news carried reports of a terrible danger safely eliminated by Our Tax Dollars at Work. Along with a picture of the blasted earth where the Dobe man now ran superfluously inside the fence, with nothing left to guard but a bulldozer and a cement mixer.

There was outrage for a few days, but as people read the story in the *Reader's Digest*, and listened to CBS News, the word spread and the protests died quickly. From the pulpits, people were gravely reminded that the Holy Bible not only admits that witches are real but declares that they must not be allowed to live. In Detroit, Willow Severty smiled to herself when the agents turned up and began following her about. She understood that it would be contrary to the national interest for her to become a martyr during this brief period before the whole foolish episode faded from the public consciousness.

The feminists muttered, "All the same, she *did* it, and none of *them* could do it," but nobody pays any attention to feminists except other feminists. And the feminists themselves had never cared much for Willow Severty; they muttered awhile, but in the backs of their minds, they were thinking again of legislation.

So it was that not a single camera crew was present on the anniversary of the miracle of the oak tree in Madison, Wisconsin. Only the construction crew putting up the Kentucky Fried Chicken place, and one lone security guard, and the bored Doberman, were there when the ground began to heave and quake under the concrete. They clung to the framework of the fried-chicken place as best they could, and got out of the way as best they could.

It was a darned shame that Willow Severty could not have been there to see the spectacle. The

great oak rose straight up into the air where the chicken-frying machines were to have been, its sturdy roots shoving the spanking new parking lot's surface aside and piling it up along the fissures. The tree was heavily laden with yellow flowers that looked very much like roses, and the crisp February air was filled with their fragrance. The snow was a nice touch, falling softly to cover up the broken concrete and lightly lace the edges of the blossoms' petals with white. It was a regular picture postcard, doing Madison proud; it was positively a symbol, there in the center of town. Peace on earth, it said. Good will to men.