operation peanut butter

by . . . Robert F. Young

He had never expected to see anyone quite so wonderful as Mr. Wings, or anyone quite so beautiful as Sally Sunbeam....

Fantasy is a much abused word, and there are times when you suspect that the word has come to have a catch-all quality, embracing as it now does everything from the occult to vampires and witches. Here, then, by way of contrast, is a gentler variant, an echo of perhaps more innocent times.

THE drought came early that year and crouched grimly above the valley. It hunched its hazy shoulders against the sky and frightened away the thunderheads that tried to build up over the surrounding hills. It blew its hot breath over the fields and the forests, and leaves of the trees turned yellow and the grass became a sickly brown. Crops withered and began to die, and the valley people had pain in their eyes when they looked out over their barren land.

It was a summer the valley people remembered for the rest of their days. Geoffrey remembered it too, but for a different reason. He remembered it not as the summer, the Great Drought, but summer of Mr. Wings. But most of all, he remembered it as the summer of Sally Sunbeam

He had just turned seven when school let out that year. He was a small boy with light brown hair it was a waste of time to put a comb to, and big brown eyes that, seemed intent on absorbing the whole world. Like most small boys—and many large ones—he liked to go fishing.

He liked to get up early mornings and pack a lunch of peanut butter sandwiches, then take his home-made hickory pole and his can of bait, and meander into the woods that fringed his father's farm. There was a talkative brook, not far away, that wound beneath a canopy of willows, and there was a particular willow beneath which he always sat, and fished and watched the ripples. When noon came he would open his little green lunch box and eat his peanut butter sandwiches, and then lie back and look at the jigsaw pieces of the sky that showed through the leafy patterns of the willows, and try to put the pieces together.

Once in a while, he caught a fish; but never a big enough one to take home and have for supper, just big enough to look at and wonder about and then throw back in the water. But catching fish was only part of the fun—the smallest part.

The woods, to Geoffrey, were a magic place where almost anything could happen. It wouldn't have surprised him one bit if Hansel and Gretel had sneaked up behind him and said "Boo!" in his ear or if Rose Red had popped her pretty face out of the underbrush on the opposite bank and said "Hello." In fact, he momentarily expected something of the sort to happen.

But just the same, though, he never expected the thing to happen that *did* happen. He never expected to see anyone quite so wonderful as Mr. Wings, or anyone quite so beautiful as Sally Sunbeam . . .

"Mr. Wings" and "Sally Sunbeam" were his own names for them, of course. He never thought to ask them their real names, and apparently they never thought to tell him. "Mr. Wings" and "Sally Sunbeam" fitted so well anyway, there wouldn't have been any point in asking.

At first he thought Mr. Wings was a bird. It was noon, and he'd just taken the first bite of one of his peanut butter sandwiches, when suddenly there was a silvery blur of wings over the brook, accompanied by a soft humming sound, and a moment later he felt the pressure of tiny feet on his shoulder. When he turned his head, there was Mr. Wings.

Mr. Wings *could* have been a bird. He wasn't any bigger than one, and in many ways he looked like one. His gray eyes, for instance, were so wide apart they were partly on the sides of his head, and his hair was more like feathers than hair; and not only that, fine down the color of moonlight grew all over his body. His chest was bird-like too, coming to a point in front instead of being flat like a human's, and his fingers and his toes were real long—probably from gripping boughs and fence wires.

The rest of him was human enough, though (except for his gossamer wings, of course, and they were more butterfly- than birdlike); he had a long straight nose and a firm mouth and chin; his shoulders were broad, his hips narrow, and his legs lithe and muscular. But the word "human" never entered Geoffrey's mind. Mr. Wings was a genuine, honest-to-God pixie, and that was all there was to it.

There was a brief silence. Then: "Hello," Mr. Wings said softly, without moving his lips. "You're Geoffrey, aren't you?"

Geoffrey didn't consider it at all remarkable that Mr. Wings should know his name. After all, Mr. Wings was a pixie, and pixies knew just about everything. He nodded. "Yes sir," he said. Then, seeing the wistful way Mr. Wings was eyeing the peanut butter sandwich, Geoffrey did the most natural thing in the world. He broke the sandwich in two and gave Mr. Wings half.

Mr. Wings accepted it eagerly. It was the biggest half and it had lots of peanut butter on it. However, he did not, as Geoffrey had expected, take a bite. Instead, he gave a little kick with his feet, flew across the brook, and disappeared among the willows.

Geoffrey wasn't angry, though he was a little disappointed. He hoped Mr. Wings would come back, and after a while Mr. Wings did—minus the half a sandwich. This time he brought Sally Sunbeam with him. Mr. Wings perched on Geoffrey's left shoulder and Sally Sunbeam on his right. They seemed tremendously excited about something.

Geoffrey had been able to take Mr. Wings in his stride, but Sally Sunbeam took his breath away. She was all gold, from her feathery golden hair to her tiny golden toenails. Her graceful body was all softness and curves, and the fine down covering it was like sun-mist. And blue eyes? Geoffrey could have sworn God had cut two little round pieces of azure out of the sky and slipped them beneath her feathered lashes, they were so blue.

After Mr. Wings had flown away, Geoffrey had started in on the second peanut butter sandwich. He'd already taken one bite, and he had it halfway to his mouth now, intending to take another. But when he saw the way Sally Sunbeam was looking at it, he did not take a bite after all, he gave it to her instead, the whole sandwich.

"Thank you," Sally Sunbeam said, and Geoffrey wondered how she and Mr. Wings could talk without opening their mouths. But her words were so sweet and so soft in his mind that the way she said them didn't seem very important. Then, a moment later, both she and Mr. Wings flew across the brook and into the willows, and he was left with other things to wonder about.

Where they had come from, instance, and where they going now; and, most important of all, whether they'd be back or not—

He didn't think they'd be back today, and besides, he was hungry; so he wound his tackle around his hickory pole, picked up his bait can and his lunch box and started home. He could hardly wait to tell someone, and when he came to the south field where his father was cultivating the tomato plants, he ran along in the row beside the tractor till his father stopped at the end of the field and idled the motor and asked him what he wanted.

“Fairies!" Geoffrey shouted. “We’ve got fairies in our woods!"

“Hmmph!" his father said.

“Honest, Dad. I saw two of them!”

His father's thin face was burned from the sun and the wind, and sweat glistened on his forehead and cheeks. There were dark circles in under his eyes. "First thing you know, you'll be seeing Martians and flying saucers," he said. "Run along home now and give your mother a hand with the washing."

The tractor snorted and began to roar again, and Geoffrey had to step out of the way of the cultivator. He watched his father start down another row and he saw the dust rising from the dry cracked ground and the sickly tomato plants and the sweat-darkened back of his father's chambray shirt.

Presently, he headed for the house, remembering how it used to be with him and his father. His father used to pat him on the head and ask him how the fish were biting and how many he'd caught, but he didn't any more. All his father did now was glower at the sky and say mean things to his mother.

Last summer his father had even gone fishing with him a few times, and once, while they were tramping through the woods, he had recited a poem about a Barefoot Boy. It was a long poem and Geoffrey had thought how smart his father must be to have remembered all of it. He wondered if his father still remembered it. He didn't think so. Something had happened to his father lately, and Geoffrey knew it was the drought.

When he came to the house he ran across the bleached grass to where his mother was hanging clothes in the summer wind. "Ma!" he shouted. "Ma! I saw two fairies in the woods!"

His mother took two clothespins out of the clothespin bag and secured one of his father's T shirts to the clothesline. "Now Jeff, you shouldn't tell such stories. Why, I'll bet you fell asleep and dreamed them!"

"But I didn't, Ma! Honest. I really saw them!"

His mother laughed. It was the laugh his father used to call her "summer laugh." Whenever she laughed that way, her pretty face got even prettier, and her eyes twinkled like tiny stars. The trouble was, she hardly ever laughed that way any more.

"Okay, okay," she said. "So you saw them. I see one myself right now—the good fairy who's going to help me with the rest of the washing . . . There's another basket of clothes on the backporch. Think you can carry it?"

He knew she didn't believe him for a minute. That was the way it was with grown-ups: they didn't believe in anything.

He gave a little sigh. "All right, Ma, I'll get it for you," he said.

Next morning he packed an extra peanut butter sandwich, just in case. He could hardly wait till noon came, he was so excited; in fact he didn't really wait, he opened his little green lunch box an hour ahead of time. He'd hardly got the cover off when there were two flurries of wings over the brook, and first thing he knew he had company for dinner.

Sally Sunbeam's eyes were more like pieces of the sky than ever. Geoffrey couldn't get over them. She smiled a soft little smile when he gave her a sandwich and she said "Thank you" again in her sweet, soundless voice. And then away she went, sandwich and all, a golden blur over the brook and among the willow branches. Mr. Wings said "Thank you" too, when Geoffrey gave *him* a sandwich, and then away *he* went, a silver blur; and then the sun was bright on the brook and there were bird calls everywhere, and the water ran in ripples like it always did, and the fish didn't bite as usual, and the day was so common and ordinary that it was as though Mr. Wings and Sally Sunbeam hadn't come around at all. But they'd been around all right, Geoffrey knew. He had only one sandwich left, and he was sure he hadn't eaten the other two; and besides, there was no doubt in his mind, anyway, as to the reality of Mr. Wings and Sally Sunbeam, and their penchant for peanut butter sandwiches was the most natural thing in the world. The only thing he couldn't understand was their apparent reluctance to eat them in his presence.

But they probably had their reasons, he decided. Perhaps they were bashful; perhaps they didn't want him to think that fairies got hungry like everybody else and sometimes had to panhandle for their meals. Whatever their reasons were, Geoffrey was sure they were good ones, and he was content to let the matter rest, so long as he could keep on seeing Sally Sunbeam's and hear her gentle voice.

And so the days drifted by, hot summer days; the rainless summer days . . . His father's face got thinner and thinner, and his mother never smiled her summer smile at all any more; but every noon Mr.

Wings and Sally Sunbeam flew down from the willows and perched upon his shoulders and importuned him with their eyes, and then flew happily away with the sandwiches he gave them ...

He kept wondering where they went, and one day he decided to investigate. He didn't think they went very far; the weight of the sandwiches precluded that. Maybe if he walked a little ways into the woods beyond the brook he'd find their hiding place and be able to watch them eat from the concealment of the underbrush.

The brook had dwindled to a mere trickle in some places, and it was easy to jump across it. There locusts beyond the willows, then a medley of maples and oaks and beeches. The forest floor littered with last year's leaves and they were so dry and crackly he didn't think he could possibly catch Mr. Wings and Sally Sunbeam unawares. But just the same he did. They were so preoccupied with what they were doing in the little clearing that they never heard him at all when he came up and hid behind an oak and peeked around its shaggy trunk.

What they were doing was a sight to behold: They weren't eating the peanut butter sandwiches at all; they were scraping the peanut butter off the bread and feeding it into a tiny machine. There was a spiral of coils at the base of the machine, terminating in a minute spigot. Beneath the spigot was a can the size of Geoffrey's bait can. Ever so often, a dark brown globule would form at the opening of the spigot, then drop into the can and whenever this happened, both Mr. Wings and Sally Sunbeam did a little dance around the machine as though the most wonderful thing in the world had come to pass.

But the machine and its two exotic operators were the least surprising aspects of the scene. What really took Geoffrey's breath away was Mr. Wings' and Sally Sunbeam's house. He knew, of course, that fairies, being unusual creatures, virtually had to live in unusual houses. But this house was more than merely unusual: it was incomprehensible.

Why, there weren't even any windows in it, unless you could call the bubble-like skylight on the top—where the shingles should have been—a window. And there was only one door, and that was halfway up the side of the house—on a level with his eyes—and was round instead of rectangular. Moreover, the house itself was cylindrical instead of square, and instead of resting on a concrete foundation, it stood perilously on three shiny poles. But the most fantastic thing about it was the material it was made out of. Geoffrey was accustomed to wooden houses, but this one didn't have any wood in it at all. It was all one piece and it was made out of something that reminded him of his mother's new teakettle.

Apparently Mr. Wings and Sally Sunbeam were ashamed of it, for they'd piled tree branches all around it. Most of the leaves had died and fallen off the branches by now, though, and the house was hardly hidden at all. Geoffrey thought it was funny they'd do such a thing; but probably they were afraid of grown-ups. And maybe they had good reason to be. Grown-ups didn't believe in fairies, and Geoffrey knew that grown-ups didn't like to be confronted with things they didn't believe in, and there was no telling what they'd do if they ran across Mr. Wings' and Sally Sunbeam's house.

He decided he hadn't better tell his parents about the house after all. His first impulse had been to run home and blab everything to his mother—or maybe even his father, if he'd listen—but he saw now that that wouldn't be the right thing to do. Mr. Wings and Sally Sunbeam were his friends—despite the fact that they'd deceived him about the peanut butter sandwiches—and he'd hate to have anything happen to them.

The thing to do, if he valued their friendship, was to keep on bringing extra peanut butter sandwiches. After all, what difference did it make whether they ate them or not? The really important thing was to keep their friendship. For all he knew, they might be the only fairies he'd ever see.

So after a while he left his hiding place behind the oak and went home and kept mum. That night he sat on the porch steps while his mother and father listened to the radio in the kitchen, and watched the fireflies wink on and off in the spiraea and forsythia bushes that bordered the road. He heard his father swear when the weatherman gave the weather at nine o'clock, and a little while later his mother called him to come to bed.

Next morning, when he was making his peanut butter sandwiches—he was taking three every day

now—he saw how low the peanut butter was getting in the big quart jar and he told his mother she'd better get some more, they were running out. His father was on the back porch, glowering at the sky, and he heard what Geoffrey. said and came stomping into the kitchen.

"Peanut butter!" he shouted. "The crops are burning up, I'm up to my neck in bills and it isn't going to rain for fifty million years, and all you can think of is peanut butter!"

"Now Pete, don't take it out on him," his mother said. "It's not his fault it doesn't rain."

"Now don't *you* start!" His father's face was drawn and the circles under his eyes were so dark they were almost black. "I've got troubles enough without *you* nagging me! And don't you dare buy another jar of peanut butter, do you hear me? Not another jar!"

Geoffrey was crying when he left the house. His tears had dried by noon, but his eyes were still red, and so was his nose, and Sally Sunbeam looked at him closely when she and Mr. Wings flew down and perched on his shoulders. What's the matter, Geoffrey?" she asked.

"It's my father," Geoffrey said. He's mad because it won't rain and he won't let my mother buy any more peanut butter."

Mr. Wings and Sally Sunbeam looked at each other over Geoffrey's nose. Mr. Wings' eyes were puzzled. "Why should he be mad because it doesn't rain?"

"Because his tomato plants are dying and his sweetcorn is drying up," Geoffrey said. "Every time he looks at his cabbages it makes him sick."

There was a silence. The sandwiches lay in Geoffrey's lap, as yet unshared. After a while he picked them up, gave one to Mr. Wings and one to Sally Sunbeam. He took a small bite of his own and began to chew.

Presently: "You don't have to worry about the peanut butter," Sally Sunbeam said. "We've got enough now ... What will happen to your father if it doesn't rain?"

"He'll lose his farm," Geoffrey said. "We'll all have to go to the Poor House."

There was another silence during which Mr.Wings and Sally Sunbeam regarded one another solemnly. "Well," Mr. Wings said finally, "I suppose we could—"

"We *do* owe him something for the peanut butter," Sally Sunbeam said.

Mr. Wings nodded, as though it were all settled. He looked at Geoffrey. "I—I guess it's time to say good-by, Geoffrey," he said. "I'm afraid you won't be seeing us any more."

Geoffrey's heart missed two beats. "I won't? Why?"

"We're going away," Sally Sunbeam said. "A long ways away." Her eyes looked funny and her little mouth was quivering. "Thank you for all the peanut butter sandwiches . . . Good-by, Geoffrey."

"Good-by, Geoffrey," Mr. Wings echoed, and then there were two flurries of wings over the brook and in the willows, a gold one and a silver one, and Geoffrey found himself all alone.

He felt so bad he couldn't eat his supper that night and his father was madder than ever. "It's those peanut butter sandwiches," his father shouted. "He's eaten so many of them he can't eat normal food any more!"

"Now Pete—"

"I haven't eaten hardly any of them," Geoffrey said. "I gave most of them away."

"Gave them away! To who?"

He'd done it now—given the whole show away. But it was all right. Mr. Wings and Sally Sunbeam were probably miles away by now. It wasn't necessary to keep them secret any longer.

"I gave them to my friends," he said. "I gave them to Mr. Wings and Sally Sunbeam."

Down came his father's fork on the plate with an awesome clatter. A cloud so dark it could have been a rain cloud settled over his father's face. "You've been in those damned woods daydreaming again! What kind of a son have I got anyway?"

"Pete, stop it! I know it's been a bad year, but you can't pick on him all the time like this."

"I didn't daydream Mr. Wings and Sally Sunbeam," Geoffrey said staunchly. "Mr. Wings and Sally Sunbeam are real."

"Real, are they?" his father said. "You take me in the woods and show them to me then! If they're

real I ought to be able to see them."

"They're gone by now," Geoffrey said. "At least I think they're gone. But I can show you where I saw them. I can show you their house."

His father was standing. The cloud on his face was darker than before. "Come on," he said. "And believe me, you'd better show me something!"

Geoffrey led the way and they walked down the road to where the woods began, and jumped the ditch and started off through the trees. The sun had set behind the hills and it was dark in the woods, a sort of gray-dark. Leaves and twigs rustled beneath their feet, and all the birds were still.

The brook hardly ran at all any more, the drought had got so bad, and in places it had collected in stagnant pools. When they came to his favorite willow, Geoffrey said: "This is where I gave then; the sandwiches, but they won't come around now, even if they are still here."

"I don't guess they would," h, father said.

"I'll show you where their house is. I don't think they'd mind now."

They hopped the brook and walked through the willows and the locusts and then through the maples and the oaks and the beeches, and it was the way it used to be when his father liked him and they'd tramped through the woods together, only not quite the same because his father didn't like him any more. Geoffrey choked back a sob and walked faster. It was real dark now, and his father had to get his flashlight out of his hip pocket and snap it on. The beam was a yellow splotch jumping on the forest floor as his father shone it first one way and then another.

And then a funny thing started to happen. Geoffrey began to hear Sally Sunbeam's voice right in his head, even though she wasn't anywhere in sight; and suddenly, he realized that that was where he'd always heard her voice—and Mr. Wings' too—right in his head; that they'd been thinking to him all the time, instead of talking; and that their thoughts had aligned themselves in words and groups of words that were already in his mind—

"I'm going to tell you a storey," Sally Sunbeam said. "It's a story about your mother and rather, but it's really about us. Please try to understand.

"Suppose your mother and father decide to take a trip to a distant own. Now suppose that the gasoline tank on their car holds just enough gasoline for them to get to this town and back, and that there isn't any place, either in this town or along the way, where the tank can be refilled. So before they leave, they're very careful to fill the tank—but they're so excited about the trip that they don't notice that the tank has a slight leak in it.

"They go to this faraway town and have a wonderful time, and finally they start back. And then, about halfway home, they discover the leak and find that, while they've lost only a few drops of gasoline, there still isn't quite enough left for them to make it *all* the way home. You see, not having quite enough gasoline is just as bad as not having any at all—you've got to use your imagination here, Geoffrey. Because if they run out of gasoline even a short distance from home, their car will crash and they will be killed.

"When they discover the leak, they're frantic. They're in a very wild part of the country, far from civilization. But they decide that the thing to do will be to stop anyway, and try to find something they can use in place of the gasoline
they've lost. So they drive into a big woods and hide their car and start looking around.

"The people in this section of the country are giants, and your mother and father are afraid to ask any of them for help. Then one day they see a boy-giant sitting by a brook, eating a sandwich that may be made out of what they're looking for. They watch the boy-giant for some time before they get up enough courage to approach him. When they do approach him, they're astonished when he *gives* them one of the sandwiches, and when they find out that it *is* made out of a substance that can be processed into a substitute for the gasoline they need, they're overwhelmed with happiness.

"So they take the sandwich back to the car and build a machine to get the oil out of the peanut butter and to change it into fuel (your own scientists have discovered the possibilities of peanut oil themselves, and some day they'll be doing the same thing). Every day the boy-giant brings more sandwiches, and once he spies on them while they're processing the peanut butter, but they pretend not to notice. Finally

they've got enough fuel to take the place of the little bit they lost, and their problem is solved. Naturally they're grateful to the boy-giant for saving their lives, and are delighted when they find there's a way they can repay him.

"We've got to go now, Geoffrey. Thank you for the peanut butter sandwiches . . . and tell your father not to worry any more about his tomatoes." Her thoughts seemed strange—as though there were tears in them. "Good-by, Geoffrey—"

"Good-by, Geoffrey," Mr. Wings echoed.

"Good-by, Sally Sunbeam," Geoffrey said aloud. "Good-by, Mr. Wings."

His father had just started to look down at him when the lightning hit the clearing. At least his father thought it was lightning, but Geoffrey knew better. And he understood suddenly why the house had seemed so peculiar. It was peculiar only when you thought of it as a house instead of as a spaceship.

His father was plunging ahead into the underbrush, shouting: "If a tree catches fire, the whole woods will go!" Geoffrey followed him. But there wasn't any fire in the clearing when they reached it. There wasn't anything in the clearing at all, except a small blackened spot where the "house" had stood, and an acrid chemical smell.

His father was shining the flashlight around wildly. "Well, I'll be damned !" he was saying. "I could have sworn that was a bolt of lightning. But it couldn't have been of course. Lightning means a thunderstorm, and a thunderstorm means rain, and anybody, even a fool like me, knows it doesn't rain any more!"

Suddenly there was an odd sound in the leaves of the trees, a gentle rustling sound. His father stopped shining the light around then, and stood perfectly still in the middle of the clearing, his face uplifted to the sky. The rustling sound grew louder, became a steady patter. Geoffrey felt the first drop of rain then, and then the second. Abruptly the whole sky lit up with lightning—real lightning, this time—and from somewhere, thunder crashed.

Slowly, the patter of raindrops turned into a steady downpour, and still his father stood unmoving in the clearing, his face uplifted to the sky. Lightning flashed again, and Geoffrey saw how wet his father’s face was, saw the raindrops coursing down his cheeks. And suddenly he realized that some of the drops weren't rain at all, but tears instead.