

The Will-o' the-Wisps Are in Town

Hans Christian Andersen

There was a man who once had known a great many new fairy tales, but he had forgotten them, he said. The fairy tale that used to come to visit him of its own accord no longer came and knocked at his door; and why didn't it come any more? It's true that for a year and a day the man hadn't thought of it, hadn't really expected it to come and knock; and it certainly wouldn't have come anyway, for outside there was war and, inside, the misery and sorrow that war brings with it.

The stork and the swallow returned from their long journey, for they had no thought of danger. But when they arrived they found the nests burned, people's houses burned, the fences smashed, yes, and some even completely gone, and horses of the enemy were trampling down the old grave mounds. Those were hard, cruel times; but they always come to an end.

And now those times were past, people said; but still no fairy tale came to knock at the door or gave any sign of its presence.

"It may well be dead and gone, like so many other things," said the man. But then the fairy tale never dies!

More than a year passed, and he longed so for the fairy tale.

"I wonder if it will ever come back and knock again." And he remembered so vividly all the various forms in which it had come to him - sometimes as young and charming as spring itself, as a beautiful maiden with a thyme wreath in her hair and a beechen branch in her hand, her eyes shining as clear as the deep woodland lakes in the bright sunshine; and sometimes it had come to him in the likeness of a peddler and had opened its pack and let the silver ribbons inscribed with old verses and mottoes flutter out. But it had been best of all when it had come as an old grandmother, with silvery hair and such large and kindly eyes. She knew so well the tales of the old, old times, of even long before the princesses spun with golden spindles, and the dragons, the serpents, lay outside, guarding them. She told her tales so vividly that black spots would dance before the eyes of her listeners and the floor become black with human blood; it was terrible to see and to hear, and yet very entertaining, since it had all happened so long ago.

"Will she ever knock at my door again?" said the man, and gazed at the door until black spots appeared before his eyes and on the floor, and he didn't know if it was blood or mourning crape from the dark and dismal days of yore.

As he sat there, the thought came to him that perhaps the fairy tale had hidden itself, like the princess in the very old tale, and if he should now go in search of it, and find it, it would shine in new splendor, lovelier than ever. "Who knows? Perhaps it is hidden in the discarded straw lying near the edge of the well. Careful, careful! Perhaps it's hidden in a faded flower, shut up in one of the big books on the shelf! "

So the man went to one of the newest books and opened it to find out, but there was no flower there. It was a book about Holger Danske, and the man read how the whole story had been invented and put together by a French monk, that it was only a romance, "translated and printed in the Danish language," and that since Holger Danske had never really lived he could never come again, as we have sung and wanted to believe. As with Holger Danske, so it was with William Tell; both were only popular legends, nothing we could depend on. Here it was all written down in a very learned manner.

"Yes, but I shall believe my own beliefs," said the man. "No road grows where no foot has trod!"

So he closed the book, put it back on the shelf, and walked over to the fresh flowers on the window sill; perhaps the fairy tale had hidden itself in the red tulips with the golden-yellow edges, or in the fresh roses, or in the brilliantly colored camellias. But only sunshine lay among the flowers - no fairy tale.

"The flowers which grew here in the days of misery were much more beautiful; but one after another was cut off, woven into wreaths, and laid in coffins, with the flag placed over them. Perhaps the fairy tale was buried with them; but then the flowers would have known of it, and the coffin would have heard of it, and every little blade of grass that shot up would have told of it. The fairy tale never dies!

"Perhaps it was here and knocked, but who at that time had ears for it or would have thought of it? Then people looked darkly, gloomily, almost angrily, at the spring sunshine, the singing birds, and all the cheerful greenery; yes, and their tongues wouldn't even repeat the merry old folk songs, and they were laid in the coffin with so much else that our heart cherished. The fairy tale may well have knocked but not been heard, and with no one to bid it welcome, it may have departed.

"I shall go out and seek it! In the country - in the woods - on the open beaches"

Out in the country stands an old manor house with red walls, pointed gables, and a flag waving from the tower. The nightingale sings under the fringed beech leaves while it gazes at the blooming apple trees in the garden and thinks they are rose trees. Here the bees labor busily in the summertime, hovering around their queen with humming song. Here the autumn storm tells much of the wild chase, of the falling leaves, and of the generations of men that pass away. At Christmastime the wild swans sing on the open water, while in the old manor house the guests beside the fire are happy to hear the ancient songs and legends.

Down into the old part of the garden, where the great avenue of old chestnut trees invites the wanderer to pause in their shade, went the man who was seeking the fairy tale. Here the wind had once told him of "Valdemar Daae and His Daughters"; here the dryad in the tree - the fairy-tale mother herself - had told him "The Old Oak Tree's Last Dream." In our grandmother's time clipped hedges stood here; now there grow only ferns and stinging nettles, hiding the broken fragments of old figures sculptured in stone; moss grows in their very eyes, but still they can see as well as ever, which the man seeking the fairy tale couldn't, for he didn't see it. Where could it be?

Hundreds of crows flew over him and the old trees, crying, "Caw! Caw!"

Then he left the garden and crossed the rampart surrounding the manor, into the alder grove. There a little six-sided house stands, with a poultry yard and a duck yard. In the midst of the living room in the house sat the old woman who managed everything and who knew exactly when every egg would be laid and when each chicken would creep out of its egg. But she wasn't the fairy tale the man was seeking; she could prove that with the certificates of Christian baptism and vaccination that she kept in her chest of drawers.

Outside, not far from the house, there is a hill covered with red thorn and broom; here lies an old gravestone, brought here many years ago from the churchyard of the near-by town in memory of one of the most honored councilmen of the neighborhood. Carved in stone, his wife and five daughters, all with folded hands and stiff ruffs, stand about him. If you looked at them for a long time it would affect your thoughts, which in turn would react on the stone, so that it would seem to tell of olden times. At least that was the way it had been with the man who was searching for the fairy tale.

As he approached, he noticed a living butterfly sitting right on the forehead of the sculptured councilman. The insect flapped its wings, flew a little bit away, then returned to sit close by the gravestone, as if to call attention to what was growing there. Four-leaved clovers grew there, seven in all, side by side. When good luck comes, it comes in

bunches. The man plucked all the clovers and put them into his pocket. "Good luck is as good as ready cash," thought the man, "though a new, beautiful fairy tale would be better still." But he could find none here.

The sun went down, big and red, and vapor rose from the meadow; the Woman of the Marsh was at her brewing.

That evening the man stood alone in his room, gazing out upon the sea, over the meadow, moor, and beach. The moon shone brightly; the mist over the meadow made it look like a great lake; indeed, legend tells us it once was a lake, and in the moonlight the eye can understand these myths.

Then the man thought of how he had been reading that Holger Danske and William Tell never really lived; yet they do live in the faith of the people, just like the lake out there, living evidence of the myth. Yes, Holger Danske will return again!

As he stood thinking, something struck heavily against the window. Was it a bird, an owl or a bat? We don't let those creatures in even when they knock. But the window burst open by itself, and an old woman looked in on the man.

"What is this?" he said. "What do you want? Who are you? Why, she's looking in at the second-floor window! Is she standing on a ladder?"

"You have a four-leaved clover in your pocket," she replied. "Or rather you have seven, but one of them has six leaves."

"Who are you?" asked the man.

"The Woman of the Marsh," she said, "the Woman of the Marsh, who brews. I was busy at my brewing. The tap was in the cask, but one of those mischievous little marsh imps pulled it out and threw it over here, where it hit your window. Now the beer's running out of the barrel, and nobody can make money that way!"

"Please tell me --" said the man.

"Yes, but wait a little," said the Woman of the Marsh. "I have something else to do right now." Then she was gone.

But as the man was about to close the window, the Woman stood before him again.

"Now it's fixed," she said, "but I'll have to brew half the beer over again tomorrow - that is, if it's good weather. Well, what did you want to know? I came back, for I always keep my word, and besides, you have seven four-leaved clovers in your pocket, one of which has six leaves; that demands respect, for that type grows beside the roadside, and not many people find them. What did you want to ask me? Don't stand there looking foolish; I have to go back to my tap and my barrel very quickly."

Then the man asked her about the fairy tale, and if she had met it in her journeys. "For the love of my big brewing vat!" said the Woman. "Haven't you told enough fairy tales? I certainly think most people have had enough of them. There are plenty of other things for you to do and take care of. Even the children have outgrown fairy tales! Give the small boys a cigar, and the little girls a new dress; they'll like that much better. But listen to fairy tales! No, indeed, there are certainly other things to attend to, more important things to do!"

"What do you mean?" the man asked. "And what do you know about the world? You never see anything but frogs and will-o'-the-wisps!"

"Beware of the will-o'-the-wisps!" said the Woman. "They're out- they're on the loose! That's what we should talk about! Come to me at the marsh, for I must go there now; there I'll tell you about it. But you must hurry and come while your seven four-leaved clovers, one of them with six leaves, are still fresh and the moon is still high!"

And the Woman of the Marsh was gone.

The town clock struck twelve, and before the last stroke had died away the man had left the house, crossed the garden, and stood in the meadow. The mist had cleared away; the Woman of the Marsh had finished her brewing. "You took your time getting here!" said the Woman of the Marsh. "Witches move much faster than men; I'm glad I'm a witch."

"What do you have to tell me now?" asked the man. "Anything about the fairy tale?"

"Is that all you can ever ask about?" said the Woman.

"Is it something about the poetry of the future that you can tell me?"

"Don't become impatient, " said the Woman, "and I'll answer you. You now think only of poetry. You ask about the fairy tale as if she were the mistress of everything. She's the oldest all right, but she always passes for the youngest; I know her very well. I was young once, and that's no children's disease! Once I was quite a pretty little elf maiden, and I danced with the others in the moonlight, listened to the nightingale, went into the forest, and met the fairy-tale maiden there, where she was always running about. Sometimes she spent the night in a halfopened tulip or in some field flower; sometimes she would slip into the church and wrap herself in the mourning crape that hung down from the altar candles."

"You seem to know all about it," said the man.

"I should at least know as much as *you* do," said the Woman of the Marsh. "Fairy tales and poetry -yes, they're like two pieces of the same material. They can go and lie where they wish. One can brew all their talk and goings-on and have it better and cheaper. I'll give it to you for nothing; I have a whole cabinet full of bottles of poetry, the essences, the best of it - both sweet and bitter herbs. I have all the poetry people might want, bottled up, and on holidays I put a little on my handkerchief to smell."

"Why, these are wonderful things you're telling me!" said the man. "You actually have poetry in bottles?"

"More than you can stand," said the Woman. "I suppose you know the story of 'The Girl Who Trod on the Loaf,' so that she would not soil her shoes. That has been written down and printed, too."

"I told that one myself," said the man.

"Yes, then you know it, and you know, too, that the girl sank right into the earth, to the Woman of the Marsh, just as the Devil's grandmother was there on a visit to inspect the brewery. She saw the girl come down and asked to have her as a souvenir of her visit, and she got her, too. I received a present from her which is of no good to me - a regular traveling drugstore, a whole cabinet full of bottled poetry. The grandmother told me where to put the cabinet, and it's still there. Now look here! You have your seven four-leaved clovers in your pocket, one of which has six leaves, so you should be able to see it!"

Sure enough, in the middle of the marsh was what looked like a great gnarled alder block, and that was the grandmother's cabinet. She explained that it was open to her and to everyone else in the world at any time, if they just knew where it was. It could be opened in front or at the back and at every side and corner; it was a real work of art and yet appeared to be only an alder stump. Poets of all countries, and especially of our own land, had been reproduced here; the essence of each had been extracted, refined, criticized, distilled, and then put into bottles. With great skill - as it's called, if one doesn't want to call it genius - the grandmother had taken a little of this poet and a little of that, added a touch of devilry, and then corked up the bottles for the use of future ages.

"Please let me see," said the man.

"All right, but there are much more important things to listen to," said the Woman of the

Marsh.

"But we're right here at the cabinet," said the man, as he looked inside it. "Why, here are bottles of all sizes. What's in this one, and what's in that one over there?"

"This is what they call May dew," said the Woman. "I haven't tried it myself, but I know that if you spill only a little drop of it on the floor, you will see before you a lovely forest lake with water lilies, flowering rushes, and wild mint. You need pour only two drops on an old exercise book, even one from the lowest class in school, and the book becomes a complete, fragrant play that is good enough to be performed and to fall asleep over, so strong is its smell. It must be as a compliment to me that they labeled the bottle 'The Brew of the Woman of the Marsh.'

"Here stands the bottle of scandal. It looks as if there is only dirty water in it, and, of course, it *is* dirty water, but with sparkling powder, three ounces of lies, and two grains of truth, stirred with a birch twig, not taken from a stalk pickled in salt and used on the bleeding backs of sinners, nor a piece of the schoolmaster's switch - no, but taken right from the broom that had been used to sweep the gutter.

"Here stands the bottle with the pious poetry set to psalm music. Every drop has a sound like the slamming of hell's gates and has been made from the blood and sweat of punishment. Some say it's only the gall of a dove; but doves are the gentlest of animals; they have no gall, say people who don't know their natural history."

"Here stood the bottle of all bottles; it took up half of the cabinet. It was the bottle with 'Stories of Everyday Life,' and it was covered with both hogskin and bladder so that it couldn't lose any of its strength. Every nation could get its own soup here; what would come forth would depend upon how you'd turn and tip the bottle. Here was an old German blood soup with robber dumplings, and there was also thin peasant soup, with genuine court officials, who lay like vegetables on the bottom, while fat, philosophical eyes floated on the top. There was English-governess soup, and French *potage à la coq*, made from chicken legs and sparrow eggs and, in Danish, called 'cancan soup.' But the best of all soups was Copenhagen soup; the whole family said so."

Here stood "Tragedy," in a champagne bottle; it could make a popping noise, and that was as it should be. "Comedy" looked like fine sand to throw into people's eyes - that is, the more refined comedy; the broader kind was also bottled, but consisted only of future playbills; there were some excellent comedy titles, such as, *Dare You spit in the Machinery?*, *One on the Jaw*, *The Sweet Ass*, and *She Is Dead Drunk!*

While the man was completely lost in his thoughts, the Woman of the Marsh thought ahead; she wanted to put an end to this.

"By now you must have seen enough of the hodgepodge chest," she said. "You know what it is now. But I haven't told you the important thing you must know. The will-o'-the-wisps are in town! That's much more important than poetry or fairy tales. I really should keep my mouth shut about it, but it seems that a compulsion - a force - something has come over me, and it sticks in my throat and wants to come out. The will-o'-the-wisps are in town! They are on the loose! Take care, you mortals!"

"I don't understand a word you're saying!" said the man.

"Please sit down on the cabinet," she said, "but be careful not to fall through and break the bottles - you know what's inside them. I'll tell you about the great event. It happened only yesterday; yet it has happened before. And now it has three hundred and sixty-four days to go. I suppose you know how many days there are in a year?"

And this was the story of the Woman of the Marsh:

"There was much excitement yesterday out here in the marsh! There was a christening

party! A little will-o'-the-wisp was born here; in fact, twelve of them were born all at once. And they have permission to go out among men, if they want to, and move around and command, just as if they were human beings! That was a great event in the marsh, and for that reason all the lady and gentlemen will-o'-the-wisps danced across the marsh and the meadow like little lights. Some of them are of the canine species, but they aren't worth talking about. I sat right there on my cabinet and held all the twelve little newborn will-o'-the-wisps on my lap. They glittered like glowworms; already they had begun to hop, and they grew bigger every minute, and after a quarter of an hour each of them was as big as his father or uncle. Now it's an old-established law that when the moon stands just where it did yesterday, and the wind blows just the way it blew yesterday, it is granted to all will-o'-the-wisps born at that hour and at that minute that they may become human beings and each of them exercise their power for a whole year.

"The will-o'-the-wisp can go about in the country, or anywhere in the world, as long as it is not afraid of falling into the sea or being blown away by a great storm. It can go right into a person, and speak for him, and perform any action it wants. The will-o'-the-wisp can take any form it likes, man or woman, and act in his or her spirit, and so go to the extreme in doing what it wishes. But in the course of that year it must succeed in leading three hundred and sixty-five people into bad paths, and in grand style, too; it must lead them away from the right and truth, and then it will receive the highest honor a will-o'-the-wisp can, that of being a runner before the Devil's stagecoach; it can then wear a fiery yellow uniform and breathe flames from its mouth. That's enough to make a simple will-o'-the-wisp lick his lips in desire. But there's danger, too, and a lot of work for an ambitious will-o'-the-wisp who wants to reach that height. If the eyes of the person are opened and he realizes what is happening and can blow the will-o'-the-wisp away, it is done for and has to come back to the marsh. Or if, before the year is over, the will-o'-the-wisp is overcome with longing for its home and family, and so gives up and comes back, then it is also done for; it can't burn clearly any longer, and soon goes out, and can't be lighted again. And if, at the end of the year, it hasn't led three hundred and sixty-five people away from the truth and all that's fine and noble, it is condemned to lie in a rotten stump and shine without being able to move. That's the worst punishment of all for a lively will-o'-the-wisp.

"Now, I know all about this, and I told it all to the twelve little ones that I held on my lap, and they were quite wild with joy. I warned them that the safest and easiest way would be to give up the honor and just do nothing at all, but the little flames wouldn't listen to that; already they could imagine themselves dressed in fiery yellow uniforms, breathing flames from their mouths.

" 'Stay here with us!' said some of the older ones.

" 'Go and have your fun with the human beings!' others said.

" 'Yes, they are draining our meadows and drying them up! What will become of our descendants?'

" ' We want to flame with flames!' said the newborn will-o'-the wisps, and that settled it.

"Then presently began the minute ball, which couldn't have been any shorter. The elf maidens whirled around three times with all the others, so as not appear proud, but they always preferred dancing with each other. Then the godparents' gifts were given - ' throwing pebbles,' it's called. The 'pebbles' were flung over the marsh water. Each of the elf maidens gave a little piece of her veil.

" 'Take that,' they said, 'and you'll be able to do the highest dance, the most difficult turns and twists - that is, if you should ever need to. You'll have the best manners, so you can show yourselves in the highest of society.'

"The night raven taught the young will-o'-the-wisps to say, 'Bra-bra-brave!' and to say it at the right times; and that's a great gift that brings its own reward.

"The owl and the stork dropped their gifts. But they said these weren't worth mentioning, and so we won't talk about it.

"The wild hunt of King Valdemar was just then rushing across the marsh, and when the nobles heard of the celebration they sent as a present a couple of handsome dogs which could hunt with the speed of the wind and carry a will-o'-the-wisp, or three, on their backs. A couple of old witches, who make a living riding broomsticks, were at the party, and they taught the young will o'-the-wisps how to slip through any keyhole as if the door stood open to them. These witches offered to carry the young ones to the town, which they knew quite well. They usually rode through the air on their own back hair fastened into a knot, for they prefer a hard seat. But now they sat on the hunting dogs and took on their laps the young will-o'-the-wisps, who were ready to go into town to start misleading and bewildering human beings. Whiz! and they were gone!

"That's what happened last night. Today the will-o'-the-wisps are in town and have started to work - but how, and where? Can you tell me that? Still, I have a telegraph wire in my big toe, and that always tells me something."

"That's a whole fairy tale!" said the man.

"Why, it's just the beginning of one," said the Woman. "Can you tell me how the will-o'-the-wisps are behaving themselves and what they're doing, in what shapes they're appearing and leading people astray?"

"I believe," said the man, "that a whole novel could be written about the will-o'-the-wisps, in twelve parts; or better still, a complete comedy-drama could be written about them."

"You should write it," said the Woman. "Or perhaps you'd better leave it undone."

"Yes, that's easier, and more pleasant," said the man. "Then we'll not be condemned by the newspapers, which is just as bad as it is for a will-o'-the-wisp to be shut in a rotten stump, shining, and afraid to say anything."

"It doesn't matter to me what you do," said the Woman. "Let the others write, if they can, or even if they can't. I'll give you an old tap from my cask; that will open the cabinet where I keep the poetry in bottles, and you can take anything you want. But you, my good man, seem to have stained your fingers enough with ink, and at the age and stability you have reached, you don't have to be running around every year looking for fairy tales, especially as there are much more important things to be done. Have you understood what's happening?"

"The will-o'-the-wisps are in town," said the man. "I heard you, and I understand. But what do you think I ought to do about it? I'd be locked up if I were to go up to people and say, 'Look! There goes a will-o'-the-wisp in honest clothes!'"

"Sometimes they wear skirts!" said the Woman. "The will-o'-the-wisp can take on any form and appear anywhere. It goes into the church, not for the sake of our Lord, but perhaps so that it can enter the minister. It speaks on election day, not for the good of state or country, but only for itself. It is an artist with the paint pot, and in the theater, but when it gets complete power, then the pot's empty! Here I go, chattering on, but what's sticking in my throat must come out, even if it hurts my own family. But now I must be the woman to save a lot of people. But, truthfully, I'm not doing it with good intentions or for the sake of any medal. I do the most insane thing I possibly can; I tell a poet about it, and soon everybody in town gets to know about it."

"The town won't take it to heart," said the man. "It won't disturb a single person. They'll all think I'm only telling them a fairy tale if I say, 'The will-o'-the-wisps are in town, said the Woman of the Marsh! Beware!'"