

**WILL-O'-THE-  
WISPS: TRANSLATED  
FROM THE GERMAN**

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Will-O'-the-Wisps: Translated from the German by S. Le Poer Trench

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**S. LE POER TRENCH**

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TRANSLATED

From the German.

BY

S. LE POER TRENCH.



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## WILL-O'-THE-WISPS.

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IT had been stormy for several days. The thick clouds could find no outlet from the mountain clefts. Dark and growling they rolled their giddy course along in paths on which no mule nor brave hunter dared to follow; or they hid deep down in the ravines, calling in deafening thunder-voices out of every cleft and chasm, and breathing their burning breath on trees and plants, which, full of fear, stood still. The timid bird sought shelter in the woods and caves, and the mountain swallow dared not fly aloft. Trembling, close to the ground, she flew in circles, with the dark points of her wing brushing the grass. The hurricane had crushed the valley with heavy blows of storm and rain. Reckless and cruel, naught cared he that the beautiful and proud forest trees stretched their green arms to him imploringly. If here and there a slight bending birch escaped unhurt from his embrace, how many a beautiful oak, how many an ever-green fir, had to yield with broken limbs to his rough caresses!

The storm's sister, the water-spout, was not far behind her brother in wildness and destruction. Born of the same cloud, she dashed with unbridled power down mountain and plain. Rushing through the overhanging masses, crushing through the ravines, she dragged by

force all with her that crossed her path, hurling trees and heavy stones down the mountain, tearing, without pity, large sods from the green velvet mantle which the spring had tenderly placed round the old rock's naked shoulders. Alas! for the ripe corn which fell in the way of the storm and floods. The delicate palms, too, were torn and thrown to the ground, never to rise again! O'erflooded by mud and stones, held down by green creepers, they died a sorrowful death; they to whom every sunbeam had told of coming triumph, and who should, in their golden ripeness, be now making their festive entry into the village on a garlanded carriage, to be blessed by the priest and fêted with song and dance by the happy peasants.

But though so much water had already fallen, the dark pall of clouds would not shake out its heavy folds. Shadow upon shadow increased, hiding every scrap of the heaven's blue, that otherwise would have looked so bright and sunny, peeping through the openings of the rocks and green trees, and shining on the flowers and grass.

But to-day, since early morning, the howling voice of the whirlwind had not been heard. The wild rain-clouds had ceased shaking their silver manes; only a soft mist followed them over mountain and valley.

On the smooth and glossy surface of the frog's pond, at the wood's edge, the rain elfs had danced their round dances the whole afternoon, never ceasing till the sun went to rest; and the evening wind, which, tired of the fight, had for a while lain down to rest in the grass, again got up and made an opening through the clouds, out of which the friendly sunbeams sent the valley a quiet evening greeting.

Pursued by the teasing breezes, the rain elfs flew to

the high and overhanging banks, and hung and swung on the twigs and the slender leaves of the rushes, or mounted in long and misty processions, on slanting sunbeams, up to their mother cloud, there to dream of new games to come.

And now a broad stream of bright sunshine falls through the torn clouds on the bright green of the wood, which one could see far, far away from the lofty mountain-side.

Arm in arm two youthful travellers stood, looking with beaming eyes on the landscape, which, now wrapped in clouds and shadows, lay at their feet.

Falling away suddenly towards the south, the mountain stretches two mighty arms far into the valley, which enclose in their grip a portion of the fruitful plain stretching away to the distant stream, and hold it in their grasp.

This is a charming little green spot, which, encircled by those mighty arms and protected from north and east winds, lies warm and sheltered on the old mountain's breast. Nourished by springs, expanding itself in ever-increasing fertility, decked with blooming fields and meadows, with wooded hills and orchards, it smiles gratefully up at the light-crowned forehead of the mountain.

Coaxingly the fertile soil insinuates itself, with its fresh young verdure, into the wildest crevices. Boldly it mounts the sudden heights with sprightly undergrowth and woodland shade. Now it springs recklessly o'er fearful clefts and precipices, to plant on some lonely cliff a few dark firs, or throw a wavy veil of birches over its barren head; and now it lies nestling on the mountain's rugged side, down which the merry streams flow to meet it.



It was not only the evening sun that threw his light on the two boys standing now on the mountain-side, for the summer holidays had just begun, and their faces were beaming with rays of joy. Theirs was the sparkling brightness of every boy who, free for several weeks from his school cage, flies with unfettered wings through fields and woods, and fancies it an eternity of ceaseless bliss. And oh! the thought of seeing again the now distant home, parents and sisters, and all the familiar and dear spots in house and garden, which in childhood's memory, are painted in the hue of the happy rose. Ah! how the young heart beats with joy!

Both the boys, almost youths, came from a large town the other side of the mountain.

The roads were heavy from rain, so that the lumbering post-carriage in which they travelled went slowly along. Whilst it was waiting for fresh horses at the last inn, behind the rise in the valley, one of the boys left the close parlour to climb the well-known path of the hill. His friend, who had hastened after him, only caught him as he had reached the top, and now stood breathless beside him.

"Well, you are glowing," said he, laughingly; "why, you climb like a chamois; I had some trouble in following you."

"Oh! here I am at home," replied the other, joyfully. "I know each tree, each stone, and can find my way perfectly by night. I have often enough climbed these rocks after sunset to catch bats. Our fellow-travellers bothered me all day, and it was worse down in that heated parlour; their stupid noise was unbearable."

"They are good fellows though," replied his friend; "a little wild and rough, but truly honest men. I believe they would have asked us to join their game;

only you put on such a formidable mien they dared not."

"Well, I am delighted they were afraid to. Only look around you, and say if it is possible you regret you did not remain down there?"

"No, indeed," said the first; "it is splendid up here, and the far-spreading view richly makes up for damp clothes and a steep path. The rain, too, has quite ceased, and long sunbeams light up the dark and wooded passes, and show far below the sparkling mountain streams. Just look at that small old church on the hill. Why, the golden cross on it is glowing as if on fire!"

"That is the Nordigen Church," was the joyful answer. "Far below, by the corner of the wood, you can see the roof of our house. Those two windows, that are now so brightly lit up, belong to the visitors' room; it is there you will be when you come to see us next year. Ah! how I wish I could take you with me now! To think that your sister should chose just the holidays to be married in!"

"Hurrah! It is very good of her to get married then, for I can be there! but I should also have liked to have gone to you. How jolly it will be next summer! Do those small houses also belong to Nordigen?"

"Yes; the cottages of the peasants lie scattered here and there between the gardens and fields. You could see the mansion from here but that the elms and limes have so spread they cover the dismal and sad old building."

"Does nobody live there now?"

"In the side wing lives a caretaker with his wife and children; but the principal part of the building is quite empty, the curtains and shutters are hardly ever unclosed.

My father often goes across and sees that all is well kept, and nothing allowed to go to ruin."

"Will then the young heir always remain in England?"

"Oh! no; he is only to be brought up there by his father's relatives; as soon as he is of age he will return. Over there, close to the church, above the roof where those high firs are growing, are his grandparents' graves. My father loved the old owners, and as long as I was at home he let me carry, each Sunday throughout the whole summer, fresh flowers for the graves, and he and old Bridgette often joined me there. The churchyard stretches close to the Park on the other side of the hill, and many is the coffin I saw lowered there."

"Your mother, then, is buried there?" asked his friend in lowered tones. "Alas! no," said he sadly, "my mother died on a far journey; she does not rest in German soil."

If you, dear reader, had sat opposite the boys that day in the coach, listening to their joyous conversation, and had heard this simple answer, and could have looked into the suddenly-saddened face of the speaker, perhaps you would have understood why that face had attracted you, and why your glance returned to the firm and finely-cut features, the earnest mouth, the dark and dreamy eyes which poured forth a light of childlike purity that seemed to belong to another world. As the shadow of a cloud, cast on a spring landscape, there lay on those young features a sad and earnest expression which told of more than the laughing days of childhood and the joy of the summer holidays. Told of more than the simple events of a schoolboy who had won a good judgment and got a prize. We are accustomed when we see this look, which seems to stretch beyond the tender years of childhood, to find in it some spiritual meaning, and anxiously