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THE  
NEVERENDING  
STORY

*Translated by Ralph Manheim*



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I

*Fantastica in Danger*

ALL THE beasts in Howling Forest were safe in their caves, nests, and burrows.

It was midnight, the storm wind was whistling through the tops of the great ancient trees. The towering trunks creaked and groaned.

Suddenly a faint light came zigzagging through the woods, stopped here and there, trembling fitfully, flew up into the air, rested on a branch, and a moment later hurried on. It was a glittering sphere about the size of a child's ball; it moved in long leaps, touched the ground now and then, then bounded up again. But it wasn't a ball.

It was a will-o'-the-wisp. It had lost its way. And that's something quite unusual even in Fantastica, because ordinarily will-o'-the-wisps make others lose their way.

Inside this ball of light there was a small, exceedingly active figure, which ran and jumped with all its might. It was neither male nor female, for such distinctions don't exist among will-o'-the-wisps. In its right hand it carried a

tiny white flag, which glittered behind it. That meant it was either a messenger or a flag-of-truce bearer.

You'd think it would have bumped into a tree, leaping like that in the darkness, but there was no danger of that, for will-o'-the-wisps are incredibly nimble and can change directions in the middle of a leap. That explains the zigzagging, but in a general sort of way it moved in a definite direction.

Up to the moment when it came to a jutting crag and started back in a fright. Whimpering like a puppy, it sat down on the fork of a tree and pondered awhile before venturing out and cautiously looking around the crag.

Up ahead it saw a clearing in the woods, and there in the light of a campfire sat three figures of different sizes and shapes. A giant, who looked as if the whole of him were made of gray stone, lay stretched out on his belly. He was almost ten feet long. Propped up on one elbow, he was looking into the fire. In his weather-beaten stone face, which seemed strangely small in comparison with his powerful shoulders, his teeth stood out like a row of steel chisels. The will-o'-the-wisp recognized him as belonging to the family of rock chewers. These were creatures who lived in a mountain range inconceivably far from Howling Forest – but they not only lived *in* the mountain range, they also lived *on* it, for little by little they were eating it up. Rocks were their only food. Luckily a little went a long way. They could live for weeks and months on a single bite of this – for them – extremely nutritious fare. There weren't very many rock chewers, and besides it was a large mountain range. But since these giants had been there a

long time – they lived to a greater age than most of the inhabitants of Fantastica – those mountains had come, over the years, to look very strange – like an enormous Swiss cheese, full of holes and grottoes. And that is why they were known as the Cheesie-wheezies.

But the rock chewers not only fed on stone, they made everything they needed out of it: furniture, hats, shoes, tools, even cuckoo clocks. So it was not surprising that the vehicle of this particular giant, which was now leaning against a tree behind him, was a sort of bicycle made entirely of this material, with two wheels that looked like enormous millstones. On the whole, it suggested a steamroller with pedals.

The second figure, who was sitting to the right of the first, was a little night-hob. No more than twice the size of the will-o'-the-wisp, he looked like a pitch-black, furry caterpillar sitting up. He had little pink hands, with which he gestured violently as he spoke, and below his tousled black hair two big round eyes glowed like moons in what was presumably his face.

Since there were night-hobs of all shapes and sizes in every part of Fantastica, it was hard to tell by the sight of him whether this one had come from far or near. But one could guess that he was traveling, because the usual mount of the night-hobs, a large bat, wrapped in its wings like a closed umbrella, was hanging head-down from a nearby branch.

It took the will-o'-the-wisp some time to discover the third person on the left side of the fire, for he was so small as to be scarcely discernible from that distance. He was

one of the tinies, a delicately built little fellow in a bright-colored suit and a top hat.

The will-o'-the-wisp knew next to nothing about tinies. But it had once heard that these people built whole cities in the branches of trees and that the houses were connected by stairways, rope ladders, and ramps. But the tinies lived in an entirely different part of the boundless Fantastican Empire, even farther away than the rock chewers. Which made it all the more amazing that the mount which had evidently carried the tiny all this way was, of all things, a snail. Its pink shell was surmounted by a gleaming silver saddle, and its bridle, as well as the reins fastened to its feelers, glittered like silver threads.

The will-o'-the-wisp couldn't get over it that three such different creatures should be sitting there so peacefully, for harmony between different species was by no means the rule in Fantastica. Battles and wars were frequent, and certain of the species had been known to feud for hundreds of years. Moreover, not all the inhabitants of Fantastica were good and honorable, there were also thieving, wicked, and cruel ones. The will-o'-the-wisp itself belonged to a family that was hardly reputed for truthfulness or reliability.

After observing the scene in the firelight for some time, the will-o'-the-wisp noticed that each of the three had something white, either a flag or a white scarf worn across his chest. Which meant that they were messengers or flag-of-truce bearers, and that of course accounted for the peaceful atmosphere.

Could they be traveling on the same business as the will-o'-the-wisp?

What they were saying couldn't be heard from a distance because of the howling wind in the treetops. But since they respected one another as messengers, mightn't they recognize the will-o'-the-wisp in the same capacity and refrain from harming it? It had to ask someone the way, and there seemed little likelihood of finding a better opportunity at this hour in the middle of the woods. So plucking up courage, it ventured out of its hiding place and hovered trembling in midair, waving its white flag.

The rock chewer, whose face was turned in that direction, was first to notice the will-o'-the-wisp.

'Lots of traffic around here tonight,' he crackled. 'Here comes another one.'

'Hoo, it's a will-o'-the-wisp,' whispered the night-hob, and his moon eyes glowed. 'Pleased to meet you!'

The tiny stood up, took a few steps toward the newcomer, and chirped: 'If my eyes don't deceive me, you are here as a messenger.'

'Yes indeed,' said the will-o'-the-wisp.

The tiny removed his red top hat, made a slight bow, and twittered: 'Oh, do join us. We, too, are messengers. Won't you be seated?'

And with his hat he motioned toward an empty place by the fire.

'Many thanks,' said the will-o'-the-wisp, coming timidly closer. 'Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Blubb.'

'Delighted,' said the tiny. 'Mine is Gluckuk.'

The night-hob bowed without getting up. 'My name is Vooshvazool.'

‘And mine,’ the rock chewer crackled, ‘is Pyornkrachzark.’

All three looked at the will-o’-the-wisp, who was wriggling with embarrassment. Will-o’-the-wisps find it most unpleasant to be looked full in the face.

‘Won’t you sit down, dear Blubb?’ said the tiny.

‘To tell the truth,’ said the will-o’-the-wisp, ‘I’m in a terrible hurry. I only wanted to ask if by any chance you knew the way to the Ivory Tower.’

‘Hoo,’ said the night-hob. ‘Could you be going to see the Childlike Empress?’

‘Exactly,’ said the will-o’-the-wisp. ‘I have an important message for her.’

‘What does it say?’ the rock chewer crackled.

‘But you see,’ said the will-o’-the-wisp, shifting its weight from foot to foot, ‘it’s a secret message.’

‘All three of us – hoo – have the same mission as you,’ replied Vooshvazool, the night-hob. ‘That makes us partners.’

‘Maybe we even have the same message,’ said Gluckuk, the tiny.

‘Sit down and tell us,’ Pyornkrachzark crackled.

The will-o’-the-wisp sat down in the empty place.

‘My home,’ it began after a moment’s hesitation, ‘is a long way from here. I don’t know if any of those present has heard of it. It’s called Moldymoor.’

‘Hoo!’ cried the night-hob delightedly. ‘A lovely country!’

The will-o’-the-wisp smiled faintly.

‘Yes, isn’t it?’

‘Is that all you have to say, Blubb?’ Pyornkrachzark crackled. ‘What is the purpose of your trip?’

‘Something has happened in Moldymoor,’ said the will-o’-the-wisp haltingly, ‘something impossible to understand. Actually, it’s still happening. It’s hard to describe – the way it began was – well, in the east of our country there’s a lake – that is, there *was* a lake – Lake Foamingbroth we called it. Well, the way it began was like this. One day Lake Foamingbroth wasn’t there anymore – it was gone. See?’

‘You mean it dried up?’ Gluckuk inquired.

‘No,’ said the will-o’-the-wisp. ‘Then there’d be a dried-up lake. But there isn’t. Where the lake used to be there’s nothing – absolutely nothing. Now do you see?’

‘A hole?’ the rock chewer grunted.

‘No, not a hole,’ said the will-o’-the-wisp despairingly. ‘A hole, after all, is something. This is nothing at all.’

The three other messengers exchanged glances.

‘What – hoo – does this nothing look like?’ asked the night-hob.

‘That’s just what’s so hard to describe,’ said the will-o’-the-wisp unhappily. ‘It doesn’t look like anything. It’s – it’s like – oh, there’s no word for it.’

‘Maybe,’ the tiny suggested, ‘when you look at the place, it’s as if you were blind.’

The will-o’-the-wisp stared openmouthed.

‘Exactly!’ it cried. ‘But where – I mean how – I mean, have you had the same . . .?’

‘Wait a minute,’ the rock chewer crackled. ‘Was it only this one place?’

‘At first, yes,’ the will-o’-the-wisp explained. ‘That is, the place got bigger little by little. And then all of a sudden Foggie, the father of the frogs, who lived in Lake

Foamingbroth with his family, was gone too. Some of the inhabitants started running away. But little by little the same thing happened to other parts of Moldymoor. It usually started with just a little chunk, no bigger than a partridge egg. But then these chunks got bigger and bigger. If somebody put his foot into one of them by mistake, the foot – or hand – or whatever else he put in – would be gone too. It didn't hurt – it was just that a part of whoever it was would be missing. Some would even fall in on purpose if they got too close to the Nothing. It has an irresistible attraction – the bigger the place, the stronger the pull. None of us could imagine what this terrible thing might be, what caused it, and what we could do about it. And seeing that it didn't go away by itself but kept spreading, we finally decided to send a messenger to the Childlike Empress to ask her for advice and help. Well, I'm the messenger.'

The three others gazed silently into space.

After a while, the night-hob sighed: 'Hoo! It's the same where I come from. And I'm traveling on the exact same errand – hoo hoo!'

The tiny turned to the will-o'-the-wisp. 'Each one of us,' he chirped, 'comes from a different province of Fantastica. We've met here entirely by chance. But each one of us is going to the Childlike Empress with the same message.'

'And the message,' grated the rock chewer, 'is that all Fantastica is in danger.'

The will-o'-the-wisp cast a terrified look at each one in turn.

'If that's the case,' it cried, jumping up, 'we haven't a moment to lose.'

'We were just going to start,' said the tiny. 'We only stopped to rest because it's so awfully dark here in Howling Forest. But now that you've joined us, Blubb, you can light the way.'

'Impossible,' said the will-o'-the-wisp. 'Would you expect me to wait for someone who rides a snail? Sorry.'

'But it's a racing snail,' said the tiny, somewhat miffed.

'Otherwise – hoo hoo –' the night-hob sighed, 'we won't tell you which way to go.'

'Who are you people talking to?' the rock chewer crackled.

And sure enough, the will-o'-the-wisp hadn't even heard the other messengers' last words, for it was already flitting through the forest in long leaps.

'Oh well,' said the tiny, pushing his top hat onto the back of his head, 'maybe it wouldn't have been such a good idea to follow a will-o'-the-wisp.'

'To tell the truth,' said the night-hob, 'I prefer to travel on my own. Because I, for one, fly.'

With a quick 'hoo hoo' he ordered his bat to make ready. And *whish!* Away he flew.

The rock chewer put out the campfire with the palm of his hand.

'I, too, prefer to go by myself,' he crackled in the darkness. 'Then I don't need to worry about squashing some wee creature.'

Rattling and grinding, he rode his stone bicycle straight into the woods, now and then thudding into a tree giant. Slowly the clatter receded in the distance.