

Robert W. Buchanan (1841-1901)

10 *Will o' the Wisp*

A ballad written for Clari, on a stormy night.

Just an inch high
 With a body all yellow,
A bright crimson eye
And limbs all awry,
 Wakes the queer little fellow— 5
Yes, awakes in the night,
Rubs his eyes in a fright,
 Yawns, harks to the thunder,
While the glowworms all set
Round his cradle so wet, 10
 Stare at him in wonder.
How it blows! how it rains!
How the thunder refrains!
While the glowworms so wan,
 As they gather together, 15
Hear the quaint little man
 Squeak faintly, 'What weather?'
 'Who is his father?'
 Who is his mother?'
They cry as they gather, 20
 And puzzle, and pother—
Such a queer little chap,
Just new-born in a nap!
And such antics are his
 As he springs on his bed, 25
Such a comical phiz,
 Such a red,
 Shining head!
Hark again,
'Midst the rain 30
 How the deep thunder crashes!

And the lightning
Is bright'ning
 In fitful blue flashes!
'Here's fun! here's a din!' 35
Cries Will with a grin—
'T'll join in the play—
It's darker than pitch
In this hole of a ditch,
What a place to be born in—I'm off and away.' 40

Out on the heath
 It rains with a will.
The Wind sets his teeth
 And whistles right shrill
All is darkness and sound, 45
 All is splishing and splashing;
The pools on the ground
 Glimmer wet in the flashing—
Up and down, round and round,
With a leap and a bound, 50
 Goes the little one dashing.
'Oh what fun!' out he screams
At the wild blue beams
 As they flicker and pass.
Then he squats down and seems 55
With his nose's red gleams
 Like a lamp in the grass;—
Then 'mid rain washing down, and the thunder still busy,
He flies spinning round, till he pauses, half dizzy.

How dark and how still, 60
In the arm of the hill,
 Lies the hamlet asleep—
While the wind is so shrill,
 And the darkness so deep!
Down the street all is dark, 65
 And closed is each shutter;

But he pauses to mark,
His face like a spark
 In the black polished gutter!
But see! what a streak 70
 Gleams out from the inn!
Overhead with a creak,
And a groan and a squeak,
 Shakes the sign; while the din
 Comes harsh from within. 75
Hark!—the jingling of glasses,
 The singers' refrain!
Will stops as he passes
 And peeps through the pane,
 Dripping, slippery with rain, 80
There they sit and they joke,
In the grey cloud of smoke,
While the jolly old host,
 With his back to the fire,
Stands warm as a toast, 85
 And doth smile and perspire.
Grave, thin, and pedantic,
 The schoolmaster sits,
While, in argument frantic
 With riotous wits, 90
The maker of boots
 Still in apron of leather,
Thumps the board and disputes,
 Contradicts and refutes;
And like sparrows collected, all birds of a feather, 95
All smoking long pipes, and all nodding together,
The Wiseacres gather, screen'd snug from the weather.

Great, broad, and brown,
 Stands the jug on the board,
 And the ale is poured, 100
And they quaff it down.
How it froths, fresh and strong,

Warm, sweet, full of spice!
Will's beginning to long
For a sip,—'tis so nice! 105
So he whispers the Wind,
Who runs round from the lane,
And they creep in behind,
And the Wind tries to find
An entrance in vain. 110
Then 'The Chimney!' cries Will,
While the Wind laughs out shrill,
And he leaps at one bound
To the roof up on high,
While the chimneys all round 115
Tremble and cry.

One moment he pauses
Up yonder, and draws his
Breath deep and strong,
Then dives like a snake, 120
While the dwelling doth quake,
To the room where they throng.
Ho, ho! with one blow
Out the lights go,
Dark and silent is all. 125
But the fire burns low
With its ghost on the wall.
'What a night! Ah, here's weather!'
All murmur together
With voices sunk low, 130
While softly slips Will
In the jug, drinks his fill,
And is turning to go,
When a hand, while none mark,
Lifts the jug in the dark; 135
'Tis the cobbler so dry
Seeks to drink on the sly!
Tarala! pirouette!

Will springs at his nose,
 The jug is upset, 140
 And the liquor o'erflows.
 'What's that?' all exclaim,
 Leaping up with a shout,
 While the cobbler in shame,
 With nose all aflame, 145
 Cries, 'The *Devil*, no doubt!
 And as fresh lights are brought
 These birds of a feather
 Think it quite a new thought
 To nod gravely together, 150
 Crying hot and distraught,
 'Well, indeed! this *is* weather!'

Tarala! pirouette!
 Out again in the wet!
 Like a small dancing spark, 155
 With his face flashing bright
 In the black dripping dark,
 Goes the elf of the night.
 Hark! from the church-tower,
 Slowly chimeth the hour! 160
 Twelve times low and deep,
 Comes the chime through the shower
 On the village asleep;—
 And where ivies enfold
 The belfry, doth sit, 165
 Huddled up from the cold,
 The owl grey and old,
 With 'Toowhoo' and 'Tcowhit!
 'Heigho!'—yawns poor Will—
 'Time for bed, by the powers!' 170
 And he lights on a sill,
 Among flower-pots and flowers,
 And just as he seems
 To slumber inclined,

A white hand forth-gleams 175
From within, and the blind
Is drawn back, and oh dear!
What a beautiful sight!
Clari's face doth appear
Looking out at the night. 180
And Clari doth stand,
With the lamp in her hand,
In her bedgown of white—
Her hair runs like gold on her shoulders, and fills
With gleams of gold-shadow her tucks and her frills, 185
And her face is as sweet as a star, and below
Her toes are like rosebuds that peep among snow.

Breathless with wonder,
Quiet and still,
He crouches under 190
The pots on the sill;
Then the blind closes slow,
And the vision doth fade,
But still to and fro
On the blind moves the shade— 195
There! out goes the light!
Will lifts up his head,
All is darker than night,
She is creeping to bed.
Oh, light be her rest! 200
She steals into her nest,
Without a beholder,
And the bed, soft and warm,
Swells up round her form
To receive and enfold her! 205

[The wind is increasing,
But the rain is ceasing,
And blown up from the west
Comes the moon wan and high,

With a cloud on her crest, 210
And a tear in her eye.
Distraught and opprest,
She drifts wearily by!

'Heigho!' yawns poor Will—
Still crouch'd down on the sill— 215
'How sleepy I feel!
There's a cranny up there
To let in the fresh air,—
Here goes! in I'll steal!
So said and so done, 220
And he enters the room

Where the dainty-limb'd one, like a lily in bloom,
Her face a dim brightness, her breath a perfume,
Sleeps softly. With noiseless invisible tread
The wanderer steals to the side of the bed 225
Where she lies, oh how fair! so sweet and so warm,
While the white clothes sink round the soft mould of her
form;

One hand props her cheek, and one unespied
Lies rising and falling upon her soft side.
Will floats to and fro, and the light that he throws 230
Just lights this or that as she lies in repose,
Leaving all the rest dark. See! he hops 'mong her hair
And shines like a jewel;—then leans down to stare
In her face,—and his ray as he trembles and spies
Just flashes against the white lids of her eyes;— 235
While her breath—oh her breath is so sweet and so fine,
Will drinks and turns dizzy—his joy is divine,
And his light flashing down shows the red lips apart,
To free the deep fragrance that steals from her heart

Just an inch high, 240
With a body all yellow,
A bright crimson eye,
And limbs all awry,

Stands the queer little fellow!
And Clari's sweet mouth 245
Just a little asunder,
Sweet with spice from the South,
Fills his spirit with wonder:
Such a warm little mouth!
Such a red little mouth! 250
The thin bud above and the plump blossom under!
'Heigho, heart's alive!
Here's a door, here I'll rest!
And he takes one quick dive
And slips into her breast! 255
And there may he thrive
Like a bird in a nest!
And Clari turns over
And flushes and sighs,
Pushes back the warm cover, 260
Half opens her eyes,
Then sinking again
Warm, languid, and bright,
With new bliss in her brain,
Dreams—such dreams—of delight! 265
She tosses and turns
In visions divine;
For within her Will burns
Like a lamp in a shrine!

. . . And now you've the reason that Clari is gay, 270
As a bird on the bough or a brooklet at play;
And now you've the reason why Clari is bright,
Why she smiles all the day and is glad all the night;
For the light having entered her bosom remains,
Darts fire to her glances and warmth thro her veins, 275
Makes her tricky and merry, yet full of the power
Of the wind and the rain, and the storm and the shower;
Half wise in the ways of the world, and half simple,
As sly as a kiss is, as deep as a dimple,

A spirit that sings like a bird on a tree,—
'I love my love, and my love loves me!'

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1882

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