

Will 'O the Wisp

by Alan Edward

The summer when it happened was the hottest I can remember. Our camp was on the edge of a pine forest, between the trees and a shallow river, yet for most of the day there was scarcely any shade, and all afternoon the sun seemed to stand still over the highest branches, pouring down heat into the small clearing where our tents were. My patrol was camped near a bank where the river narrowed, where the water moved slowly over sand and tiny pebbles, and there we built our dam, piling stones and boulders up until the river behind it rose about five feet before spilling over the top, deep enough to swim in. So nearly all day we wore nothing but swimming-trunks, so we could lie in the sun, play in the water, or – best of all – you could climb the tree just above the deepest part of our pool, swing along by your hands from a big branch, the sun getting hotter and hotter on your skin, until you were able to drop with a great splash into the deliciously cool water right below.

But in the evenings it soon grew chilly; opposite our site, the sun dropped through a space between the two tallest trunks, a low haze dimmed and cooled it, and then we brought dead wood from the deeper part of the forest and lit our fire.

It was about this time on the second last evening that I felt it again, but worse than ever before. We were, I remember, sitting round the fire with the heat on our knees, drinking coffee. I looked over to where Dieter was, in his own patrol, and I saw that Joe had gone across to him again and was talking to him, but with their faces much closer than last time. Then when I saw Joe reach out and slide his hand gently up and down the back of Dieter's neck, it all came back without warning – that sharp twist in my inside, and the awful dry choking feeling rising right into my throat as if I was going to cry; though I didn't. Now just then, anyhow.

Joe was, by the way, our Scoutmaster at the time. Dieter takes rather more explaining. He had come to England only a few months before; our dads had worked together recently, so it was natural that I should be asked to make friends with him, show him around and so on – and I did. He was the same age as me, just over twelve. The thing about Dieter was – to put it simply, people noticed him. If I could I would go on for quite a bit about bright blue eyes and long lashes, silky-blond hair, cupid lips, and the way he was always dressed so nicely in those freshly laundered tee-shirts, brief colored shorts, tiny white ankle socks and so on. Cherubic, my mum said. Nordic, said Dad. Yes, people noticed him – and Joe certainly had, very early on. They were still talking, and,

although they were a distance away, you could see that they were extraordinarily happy to be together; I could see Dieter's even white teeth as he looked up at Joe and laughed.

By now I had got to like Dieter too – a lot. And there was more. That was why, when I saw them get up and stroll away from the main group, I felt my stomach tighten with a mixture of rage at my sheer stupidity at having brought him to Scouts, with jealousy (I'm not ashamed to admit it) and with sheer, absolute misery. I even convinced myself that, before I lost sight of them, Joe had taken Dieter's hand, but he wouldn't have dared. Not there.

I got up quickly and walked out of the firelight, rubbing the back of my hand across my eyes. I would talk to Mark – not perhaps to tell him everything – but I knew I had to do something before the end of camp, and I was beginning to see what it must be. Mark was, by the way, my Patrol Leader, and a good friend. Yet I wasn't exactly sure how I would put it to him, because I was still a little embarrassed by how I felt, and I didn't think he would understand. He would either laugh or call it a 'schoolboy crush', and tell me I would get over it. But I knew I would never get over it. At least until...

"Little hot-pants, you mean?" said Mark with a grin. I didn't much care for Dieter to be called that, but I let it go.

"There'll be trouble," I said, "I bet you anything there will."

"Perhaps there will, perhaps there won't," said Mark casually, "Why let it bother you?"

"You see, I'm sort of responsible for him," I said, though not sure how you tried to look responsible. "If anything were to happen – you see, I promised Dieter's dad to keep an eye on him. So I have to, you know."

"I see what you mean – or I suppose I do," said Mark, "That is – if what were to happen exactly?"

"Oh, don't be so absolutely, totally *mental*, Mark," I said impatiently, "You *know* what I mean."

"It probably already has," Mark said.

"No." I shook my head violently.

"Well, perhaps not. But it will – they will – this evening, at any rate."

"What do you mean?" I asked quickly.

He explained; it had to do with what we always did on the last night of camp – to tire us out, they said. We went off to the hills on a minibus for a night hike or one of those endless wild games.

"Except," said Mark, "that Joe isn't going – and neither is Dieter. I know that, because I heard Joe asking him to stay and help get the barbecue ready."

"No, they mustn't," I said. "What can we do, Mark?" "I can fix it – it's easy. Dieter will simply have to come with us, because I'll tell him. I'm Senior PL, remember. I'll say that everyone has to go."

"But then Joe will tell him he has to stay," I said doubtfully.

"Then it's just a matter of keeping Joe out of the way until the minibus has gone. I presume you don't specially want to go hacking through the woods. So,

you know, take his attention. Keep in the hut. Distract him.”

“How am I to do that?”

Mark clicked his tongue. “Oh, don't act so innocent, Chris!”

Then he smiled, tapped the side of his nose, and said, “You'll find away, won't you? Actually, you *are* quite a nice-looking boy – from certain angles.”

Well – I did quite a good thing of pretending not to understand again, then of staring at him with my eyes wide and my mouth open, but as soon as Mark had said it I was quite sure about what had been in my mind all along.

Of course Mark may have been half-joking, but I knew that he would do his part, so it was up to me to do mine. That last night came very soon after that; I managed, somehow, to wriggle out of the hike, and came back to my tent while the rest of my patrol were loading the minibus; I had about twenty minutes. What to wear? I thought first about my best Scout uniform with my neatest scarf and shortest shorts, but found that everything had got very grubby, so that was out. Finally, with a little quiver of anxiety at my own daring, I opted for swimming-trunks, and picked a pair that were rather small and tight for me, and that fastened at the sides with nothing but a couple of strings. I rummaged for a mirror, combed my hair neatly, then peered out of the tent. The coast was clear, so I slid out from under the back flap and ran across the grass to the wooden hut that was Joe's HQ. I tapped on the door, and went in; Joe was sitting by the log fire reading a paper and turned round as I came in. He looked a little surprised, as well he might.

“A bit late for swimming, isn't it?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No – the water's still quite warm, there was so much sun in the clearing today. It was super.”

Joe smiled. “The warm bit might just have flowed past! But you're not wet”

“I mean – it's usually super. That is, I'm looking forward to it.”

“Ah – don't let me keep you, then.”

This was no good. I said quickly, “I just wanted to – just have a talk. If I could.”

Joe would, I knew, expect to be leaving soon, but he didn't seem annoyed that I had come in, or in a hurry; he just nodded, and said, “Of course, Chris.”

This was better; he would forget the time altogether in a moment.

“I haven't got very long,” he said, “but enough time for a cup of tea. Will you have one?”

“Oh yes, rather,” I said eagerly.

I disliked tea. I watched him make it, not contributing very much except for a moderate quantity of bright boyish chatter, then he sat down in his armchair again and I squatted by the fire.

“So that was it, then?” he asked.

“That was what?”

“What you came to say. Most interesting.”

“No, it wasn't” I said quickly, “No – no, it wasn't just that. Not altogether,

that is.”

God.

At this point I was to act confused, but now I found that I didn't have to do much acting. I looked down, squirmed, and tugged at the string of my trunks, and they came undone – and that wasn't intentional either.

“It was something Mark said to me once – about boys,” I began, “that sometimes when they get to about our age it's not – it's not, well, odd or funny like some people say but – almost more natural in a way. I mean, that is – not with girls – but, that is, instead of with girls, you know. That's – that's what he said.”

Having thus made myself pretty clear, I stopped.

Joe put down his tea, smacking me lightly on the shoulder, and laughed. “Your friend is incoherent, but correct – very correct. If I understand you, that is.”

“I thought I might be right,” I said. “I've often – well, I've often thought the same thing too. Sometimes.”

“Tell me why, Chris.”

I wriggled a little and felt my face growing pink. “It's just that – just like I say. Maybe when I'm with somebody.”

“Anybody in particular?”

I nodded, not looking up. The blush wouldn't go away, but I didn't much care now, perhaps because I'd almost stopped pretending.

“You want to say who?”

I shook my head quickly. “Not now, anyhow.”

“Well, don't be so shy about it, you silly boy. It really is the most natural thing in the world to fall in love – and I *don't* mean with a girl, either. There's nothing odd about it at all, or nothing new. It's something the wisest men the the world have known about ever since words began to be written down.”

“Suppose – suppose it wasn't another boy, but a man?”

He was silent for a very long time, and I didn't dare to look up. Then he said quietly “It's the same thing, of course.”

“But what do they *do*?” I asked, innocent but earnest. “I know what they do with girls – but with a boy... and a man... I mean – 'how'?”

That was a mistake. He laughed shortly, and said, “You *really* don't know? Well, well, well! But if you do require information, come back when I've got fifteen minutes or so, and I'll give you all you want. For the moment would you mind passing my jacket across? I think it's on the table.”

I got up quickly, but not to go to the table. I went right over beside him and said, “No, don't just tell me. Show me.”

“What?”

“By the way,” I said, “What was that about your jacket?”

“Never mind my jacket. What was that *you* asked?”

“I asked you to show me.”

Joe swallowed; he seemed at a loss now, but I felt oddly certain of myself

now, for the first time that evening. Then, after a moment, he took both my hands and pulled me near him, quite close, with my knees between his.

“Chris,” he said, “let’s both tell the truth. It’s not *just* that you want me to show you, that you want to know, is it? Well?”

I looked down, gulped, and found I couldn’t speak. I shook my head.

“It’s a bit more, isn’t it?”

I nodded, then Joe said, “You’d better nip across and close the door and the curtains, then – though I think they’ve all gone.”

I did what he asked, then stood looking at him uncertainly. I fiddled with the string of my trunks, and asked, “Shall I . . . ?”

The string seemed to have got in a knot again. I was suddenly shy; although Joe had seen me with my pants off before, this was different – but I wanted to take them off more than anything and I very quickly did. I tossed them on the floor, then went across to Joe, but he held his hand up.

“Wait a minute,” he said.

I ask you! I knew, now, that the last thing I wanted to do was wait a minute.

“No,” I said, and sat on his knee. He didn’t do much for a moment or two, then put one hand round the side of my hip, holding me where I was; he slid the other right down in front of me and kept it there, just moving his fingers a little.

Then he stopped even that, and said, “Tell me something first, Chris. Why now?”

“Please,” I whispered.

“No – answer my question first.”

“What do you mean, why now?”

“Just what I say. We’ve been at camp three weeks now; I’ve been fairly friendly to you, I suppose – but you’ve always just spoken to me in the ordinary way, and there’s never been any sign from you of – of anything, then suddenly on the last night... this. So I’m puzzled, and before we – before we get any further I want to know – why?”

I shook my head. A big lump was gathering in my chest, and I could hardly speak. “I – I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do. There’s something else, isn’t there? Come on now, Chris, why don’t you tell Joe what it is?”

He put an arm around my neck and, when he did, I suddenly started to cry and couldn’t stop. He held me close for a long time, my face buried in his chest, and in between sobs it all came tumbling out – about him, about Dieter, about Mark and about our plan – and very tawdry it all sounded, too.

“You must think I’m horrible now,” I said. “I’d better go.” I wriggled free and stood up, but Joe held me round the waist, then gently slapped my bottom and said, “If you think I’m going to let you go now you’re greatly mistaken. But you’re also wrong about Dieter – very wrong.”

I was surprised now. “Yes?”

“Yes, Chris. Look – sit on the other chair; it’s not easy to explain like this.”

I did as he said – but didn’t get- dressed, mainly because my eyes were still

sore and half-blinded with crying, and I couldn't see where my trunks were.

"It has to do with what you've just said, Chris, about falling in love, about being jealous, and about you coming to me as a kind of decoy, or substitute, if you like. You see, that's what Dieter was – a substitute. Oh, yes, he's a very pretty kid and I'm fond of him, I don't deny that. But sometimes – and you may not understand this now – sometimes, perhaps once or twice in your lifetime, you come across someone who is just so stunningly attractive, breathtaking even, that you feel – and this is probably just some defect in yourself – you feel that he can't possibly be for you, that he is for you – well, unattainable. Perhaps that doesn't make much sense; it's not easy to explain.

"Yes, I understand," I said, quite truthfully.

"So then you have to have – well, someone else."

"Dieter."

He nodded, and neither of us said anything for at least a minute or two.

Then Joe spoke hesitantly. "But in the evenings, when Dieter's gone and it's quiet..."

He reached into his jacket pocket and took something out. "There's this photo. It's in my wallet; I carry it around with me almost everywhere."

"Show me," I said.

It was very dim in the hut now, as we hadn't lit a lamp, so I took the picture across to the window where I could see it better, and stood looking at it for a long time. It had been taken last Easter, I decided, on one of the sunny days at the end of our last camp. It was good – very good. I was standing on the edge of the river-bank looking down into the water, half in shade, with the sun coming down through the trees behind me, lighting my hair round the edges a little. Whether I'd been about to dive in or had been contemplating a bit of poaching I couldn't remember – but it didn't matter now. I ran across, handed Joe the picture, and hugged him.

"You *are* silly!" I said. Then I ran away, picked up my trunks, threw them at him, and rolled around in pretended laughter. "*Unattainable!* Lord, how thick grown-ups are!"

"Silly, am I?" said Joe, laughing. "And what about that little charade of yours, then? Just because of your having this thing about Dieter and being jealous of me! What about that, then?"

I stopped short and stared at him. Could it be that even yet he hadn't got it right?

"Jealous of you?" I said. "Jealous of *you*? No – jealous of *Dieter* – don't you understand?"

His jaw dropped open. Yes, grown-ups really *are* thick sometimes. Then I crumpled my trunks into a ball and stuffed them into a drawer. I knew that, when he had finally worked it out, I wouldn't be needing them for some time.