

The Wild Huntsmen

German—Walter Scott

The tradition of the “Wild Huntsmen” (Die Wilde Jäger) is a popular superstition, very generally believed by the peasants of Germany. Whoever wishes for more information respecting these imaginary Sportsmen, will find his curiosity fully satisfied, by perusing the first Volume of the German Romance of “the Necromancer;” (Der Geister-banner.) The original of this Ballad is by Burger, Author of the well-known “Leonora.”

The Wildgrave¹ winds his bugle horn;
To horse, to horse, halloo, halloo!
His fiery courser snuffs the morn,
And thronging serfs their Lord pursue.

The eager pack, from couples freed,
Dash through the bush, the brier, the brake;
While answering hound, and horn, and steed,
The mountain echoes startling wake.

The beams of God’s own hallow’d day
Had painted yonder spire with gold,
And, calling sinful man to pray,
Loud, long, and deep the bell had toll’d.

But still the Wildgrave onward rides;
Halloo, halloo, and hark again!
When, spurring from opposing sides,
Two stranger horsemen join the train.

Who was each stranger, left and right,
Well may I guess, but dare not tell:
The right-hand steed was silver white,
The left, the swarthy hue of hell.

The right-hand horseman, young and fair,
His smile was like the morn of May;
The left, from eye of tawny glare,
Shot midnight lightning’s lurid ray.

He waved his huntsman’s cap on high,
Cried, “Welcome, welcome, noble Lord!
“What sport can earth, or sea, or sky,
“To match the princely chase, afford?”—.

¹ The Wildgrave is a German title, corresponding to the Earl-Warden of a royal forest.

—“Cease thy loud bugle’s clanging knell,”—
Cried the fair youth with silver voice;
“And for devotion’s choral swell,
“Exchange the rude unhallow’d noise.

“To-day th’ ill omen’d chase forbear;
“Yon bell yet summons to the fane:
“To-day the warning spirit hear,
“To-morrow thou may’st mourn in vain.”—

—“Away, and sweep the glades along!”—
The sable hunter hoarse replies;
—“To muttering monks leave matin song,
“And bells, and books, and mysteries.”—

The Wildgrave spurr’d his ardent steed,
And, launching forward with a bound,
—“Who for thy drowsy priestlike rede
“Would leave the jovial horn and hound!

“Hence, if our manly sport offend:
“With pious fools go chaunt and pray;
“Well hast thou spoke, my dark-brown friend,—
“Halloo! halloo! and hark away!”—

The Wildgrave spurr’d his courser light,
O’er moss and moor, o’er bolt and hill,
And on the left and on the right,
Each stranger horseman follow’d still.

Up springs, from yonder tangled thorn,
A stag more white than mountain snow;
And louder rung the Wildgrave’s horn,
“Hark forward, forward, holla, ho!”—

A heedless wretch has cross’d the way,—
He gasps the thundering hoofs below;
But, live who can, or die who may,
Still forward, forward! On they go.

See where you simple fences meet,
A field with autumn’s blessings crown’d;
See, prostrate at the Wildgrave’s feet,
A husbandman with toil embrown’d.

“O mercy! mercy! noble Lord;
“Spare the poor’s pittance,” was his cry,
“Earn’d by the sweat these brows have pour’d
“In scorching hour of fierce July.”—

Earnest the right-hand stranger pleads,
The left still cheering to the prey:
The impetuous Earl no warning heeds,
But furious holds the onward way.

“Away, thou hound, so basely born,
“Or dread the scourge’s echoing blow!”—
Then loudly rung his bugle-horn,
—“Hark forward, forward, holla ho!”—

So said, so done—a single bound
Clears the poor labourer’s humble pale:
Wild follows man, and horse, and hound,
Like dark December’s stormy gale.

And man, and horse, and hound, and horn,
Destructive sweep the field along,
While joying o’er the wasted corn
Fell Famine marks the madd’ning throng.

Again up roused, the timorous prey
Scours moss and moor, and holt and hill;
Hard run, he feels his strength decay,
And trusts for life his simple skill.

Too dangerous solitude appear’d;
He seeks the shelter of the crowd;
Amid the flocks domestic herd
His harmless head he hopes to shroud.

O’er moss and moor, and holt and hill,
His track the steady blood-hounds trace;
O’er moss and moor, unwearied still,
The furious Earl pursues the chase.

Full lowly did the herdsman fall:
“O spare, thou noble Baron, spare
“These herds, a widow’s little all;
“These flocks, an orphan’s fleecy care.”—

Earnest the right-hand stranger pleads,
The left still cheering to the prey;
The Earl nor prayer nor pity heeds,
But furious keeps the onward way.

“Unmanner’d dog! To stop my-sport
“Vain were thy cant and beggar whine,
“Though human spirits of thy sort
“Were tenants of these carrion kine!”—

Again he winds his bugle horn,
—“Hark forward, forward, holla, ho!”—
And through the herd, in ruthless scorn,
He cheers his furious hounds to go.

In heaps the throttled victims fall;
Down sinks their mangled herdsman near;
The murd’rous cries the stag appal,
Again he starts, new-nerved by fear.

With blood besmear’d, and white with foam,
While big the tears of anguish pour,
He seeks, amid the forests gloom,
The humble hermit’s hallow’d bour.

But man and horse, and horn and hound,
Fast rattling on his traces go;
The sacred chapel rung around
With hark away, and holla, ho!

All mild, amid the route profane,
The holy hermit pour’d his prayer:
—“Forbear with blood God’s house to stain;
“Revere his altar, and forbear!

“The meanest brute has rights to plead,
“Which, wrong’d by cruelty, or pride,
“Draw vengeance on the ruthless head;—
“Be warn’d at length, and turn aside.”—

Still the fair horseman anxious pleads,
The black, wild whooping, points the prey;
Alas! the Earl no warning heeds,
But frantic keeps the forward way.

—“Holy or not, or right or wrong,
“Thy altar and its rights I spurn;
“Not sainted martyrs’ sacred song,
“Not God himself, shall make me turn.”—

He spurs his horse, he winds his horn,
—“Hark forward, forward, holla, ho!”—
But off, on whirlwind’s pinions borne,
The stag, the hut, the hermit, go.

And horse and man, and horn and hound,
And clamour of the chase was gone:
For hoofs and howls, and bugle sound,
A deadly silence reign’d alone.

Wild gazed the affrighted Earl around;—
He strove in vain to wake his horn,
In vain to call; for not a sound
Could from his anxious lips be borne.

He listens for his trusty hounds;
No distant baying reach’d his ears;
His courser, rooted to the ground,
The quickening spur unmindful bears.

Still dark and darker frown the shades,
Dark as the darkness of the grave;
And not a sound the still invades,
Save what a distant torrent gave.

High o’er the sinner’s humbled head
At length the solemn silence broke;
And from a cloud of swarthy red,
The awful voice of thunder spoke.

—“Oppressor of creation fair!
“Apostate spirit’s harden’d tool!
“Scorner of God! scourge of the poor!
“The measure of thy cup is full.

“Be chased for ever through the wood,
“For ever roam the affrighted wild;
And let thy fate instruct the proud,
“God’s meanest creature is his child.”—

'Twas hush'd: one flash of sombre glare
With yellow tinged the forests brown;
Up rose the Wildgrave's bristling hair,
And horror chill'd each nerve and bone.

Cold pour'd the sweat in freezing ril;
A rising wind began to sing;
And louder, louder, louder still,
Brought storm and tempest on its wing.

Earth heard the call—her entrails rend;
From yawning rifts, with many a yell,
Mix'd with sulphureous flames, ascend
The misbegotten dogs of hell.

What ghastly huntsman next arose,
Well may I guess, but dare not tell:
His eye like midnight lightning glows,
His steed the swarthy hue of hell.

The Wildgrave flies o'er bush and thorn,
With many a shriek of helpless woe:
Behind him hound, and horse, and horn,
And hark away, amid holla, ho!

With wild despair's reverted eye,
Close, close behind, he marks the throng.;
With bloody fangs, and eager cry,
In frantic fear he scours along.

Still, still shall last the dreadful chase,
Till time itself shall have an end;
By day, they scour earth's cavern'd space,
At midnight's witching hour, ascend.

This is the horn, and hound, and horse,
That oft the lated peasant hears
Appall'd he signs the frequent cross,
When the wild din invades his ears.

The wakeful priest oft drops a tear
For human pride, for human woe,
When at his midnight mass, he hears
The infernal cry of holla, ho!