

Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832)

20 *The Wild Huntsman*

This is a translation, or rather an imitation, of the *Wilde Jäger* of the German poet Bürger. The tradition upon which it is founded bears, that formerly a Wildgrave, or keeper of a royal forest, named Faulkenburg, was so much addicted to the pleasures of the chase, and otherwise so extremely profligate and cruel, that he not only followed this unhallowed amusement on the Sabbath, and other days consecrated to religious duty, but accompanied it with the most unheard-of oppression upon the poor peasants, who were under his vassalage. When this second Nimrod died, the people adopted a superstition, founded probably on the many various uncouth sounds heard in the depth of a German forest, during the silence of the night. They conceived they still heard the cry of the Wildgrave's hounds; and the well-known cheer of the deceased hunter, the sounds of his horses' feet, and the rustling of the branches before the game, the pack, and the sportsmen, are also distinctly discriminated; but the phantoms are rarely, if ever, visible. Once, as a benighted *Chasseur* heard this infernal chase pass by him, at the sound of the halloo, with which the Spectre Huntsman cheered his hounds, he could not refrain from crying, "*Glück zu Falkenburgh!*" [Good sport to ye, Falkenburgh!] "Dost thou wish me good sport?" answered a hoarse voice; "thou shalt share the game;" and there was thrown at him what seemed to be a huge piece of foul carrion. The daring *Chasseur* lost two of his best horses soon after, and never perfectly recovered the personal effects of this ghostly greeting. This tale, though told with some variations, is universally believed all over Germany.

The French had a similar tradition concerning an aërial hunter, who infested the forest of Fountainbleau. He was sometimes visible; when he appeared as a huntsman, surrounded with dogs, a tall grisly figure. Some account of him may be found in "Sully's Memoirs," who says he was called *Le Grand Veneur*. At one time he chose to hunt so near the palace, that the attendants, and, if I mistake not, Sully himself, came out into the court, supposing it was the sound of the king returning from the chase. This phantom is elsewhere called Saint Hubert.

The superstition seems to have been very general, as appears from the following fine poetical description of this phantom chase, as it was heard in the wilds of Ross-shire.

"Ere since of old, the haughty thanes of Ross, —
So to the simple swain tradition tells, —
Were wont with clans, and ready vassals throng'd,
To wake the bounding stag, or guilty wolf,

There oft is heard, at midnight, or at noon,
 Beginning faint, but rising still more loud,
 And nearer, voice of hunters, and of hounds,
 And horns, hoarse winded, blowing far and keen: —
 Forthwith the hubbub multiplies; the gale
 Labours with wilder shrieks, and rifer din
 Of hot pursuit; the broken cry of deer
 Mangled by throttling dogs; the shouts of men,
 And hoofs, thick beating on the hollow hill.
 Sudden the grazing heifer in the vale
 Starts at the noise, and both the herdsman's ears
 Tingle with inward dread. Aghast, he eyes
 The mountain's height, and all the ridges round,
 Yet not one trace of living wight discerns,
 Nor knows, o'erawed, and trembling as he stands,
 To what, or whom, he owes his idle fear,
 To ghost, to witch, to fairy, or to fiend;
 But wonders, and no end of wondering finds."

Albania — reprinted in *Scottish Descriptive Poems*, pp. 167, 168.

A posthumous miracle of Father Lesley, a Scottish capuchin, related to his being buried on a hill haunted by these unearthly cries of hounds and huntsmen. After his sainted relics had been deposited there, the noise was never heard more. The reader will find this, and other miracles, recorded in the life of Father Bonaventura, which is written in the choicest Italian.

The Wildgrave 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,
 5
 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, 10
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, 15
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. 20

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, 25
Cried, "Welcome, welcome, noble lord!
What sport can earth, or sea, or sky,
To match the princely chase, afford?" —

"Cease thy loud bugle's changing knell,"
Cried the fair youth, with silver voice; 30
"And for devotion's choral swell,
Exchange the rude unhallow'd noise.

"To-day, the ill-omen'd chase forbear,
Yon bell yet summons to the fane;
To-day the Warning Spirit hear, 35
To-morrow thou mayst 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.” 40

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! 45
With pious fools go chant and pray: —
Well hast thou spoke, my dark-brow'd friend;
Halloo, halloo! and, hark away!”

The Wildgrave spurr'd his courser light,
O'er moss and moor, o'er holt and hill; 50
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, 55
“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. 60

See, where yon 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! 65
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; 70
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, 75
“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. 80

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

Again uproused, the timorous prey 85
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; 90
Amid the flock’s 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, 95
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!" — 100

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 105
 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!" 110
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 murderous cries the stag appal, — 115
 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 forest's gloom,
 The humble hermit's hallow'd bower. 120

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 rout profane, 125
 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, 130
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, 135
But frantic keeps the forward way.

“Holy or not, or right or wrong,
Thy altar, and its rites, I spurn;
Not sainted martyrs’ sacred song,
Not God himself, shall make me turn!” 140

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, 145
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, 150
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, 155
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. 160

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! 165
Apostate Spirits' 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; 170
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;
Uprose the Wildgrave's bristling hair, 175
And horror chill'd each nerve and bone.

Cold pour'd the sweat in freezing rill;
A rising wind began to sing;
And louder, louder, louder still,
Brought storm and tempest on its wing. 180

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, 185
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; 190
Behind him hound, and horse, and horn,
And, "Hark away, and holla, ho!"

With wild despair's reverted eye,
Close, close behind, he marks the throng,
With bloody fangs and eager cry; 195
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. 200

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 205
For human pride, for human woe,
When, at his midnight mass, he hears
The infernal cry of, "Holla, ho!"

1796

(From *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott*. Ed. J. G. Lockhart. Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1841)