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THE WILD HUNTSMAN!
OR,
THE DEMON'S SKELETON CHASE

A LEGEND OF THE ODENWALD.

by

August Bürger

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TRANSCRIPTION BY
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LEGENDS OF TERROR!
AND
TALES
OF THE
WONDERFUL AND THE WILD.
ORIGINAL and SELECT,
IN PROSE AND VERSE.
WITH HISTORICAL ILLUSTRATIONS.

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THE WILD HUNTSMAN!
OR,
THE DEMON'S SKELETON CHASE
A LEGEND OF THE ODENWALD.

FROM THE GERMAN OF BÜRGER.

O'er hill and dale, thro' glen and mire,
 Thro' dew and cloud, through storm and night,
Thro' earth and water, air and fire,
 The Phantom Huntsmen wing their flight!

Thro' blood-red heat, and freezing cold,
 The Jager spirits rushing glide ;
When lightnings gleam and thunders roll,
 With horrid screams they fiercely ride.

And as the awful sound comes near,
 And on the whirlwind's wing is borne ;
The 'frighted peasant starts to hear
 The yell of their midnight horn !

The singular tradition of the "Wild Huntsmen," (Die Wilde Jäger) is a superstition very popular in Germany, and generally believed by the peasants of that country. The opera of "Der Freischütz" is partly founded upon it, and which it will serve to illustrate. The meaning of the *Skeleton Chase*¹ in the air, during the incantation scene, being explained by the following ballad.

As many of our readers after perusing this Legend, may be desirous of obtaining more information respecting these imaginary sportsmen, we beg to observe, that they will find their curiosity fully satisfied, by perusing the first volume of the German Romance of "The Necromancer," (Der Geister-banner.²)

¹ All words seen here in Italics are italicised in the original text

² This is [sic] from the text.

The original of this ballad is by Bürger, the author of the well known “Leonora.” In the “Tales of Wonder,” collected by the late M. G. Lewis, there is a translation from Bürger’s ballad by Sir Walter Scott. The following is freely translated from the same source, and although the writer does not aspire to a competition with that great master of the lyre, he trusts, that if it cannot boast of his poetical genius, it will be found to convey closely the meaning and spirit of the original German composition.

It may be necessary to observe that the appellation “Wildgrave,” means warden of the chase, or Grand Veneur, formerly one of the great officers of the Emperor’s court – and corresponds with our Lord Warden of the royal forests. The term is derived from the German words *Das*, wild game, animals feræ naturæ [sic]; and *Graff*, Earl, Comes, Warden [sic] : thus *Margrave* means Warden of the Marches ; *Landgrave*, Governor of an inland county ; *Rheingrave*,³ commander of the Rhone, &c. &c.

A writer in the “New Monthly Magazine,” has also made use of the above superstition in an interesting ballad, which from its connection with our subject, we are induced to insert in this place.⁴

³ The translator is incorrect here, Rheingrave does not refer to a commander of the Rhone, As it refers not to a military title but a title of hereditary peerage. Specifically it refers to a Count whose lands are located in Rheingau, which is south of the Rhine. Cf. 1630 edition of John Smith, *True Travels*, in Kupperman 1988, p. 45: “the Turks daring the Duke daily to a sett battell, who at length drew out his Army, led by the **Rhine-Grave** [...].”

⁴ Please note, the six-stanza poem that follows, in smaller font, is by an unknown writer and is not part of our main author’s translation of Bürger, which will follow in larger font.

The Wild Night Huntsman.

Thy rest was deep at the slumberer's hour,
If thou didst not hear the blast
Of the savage horn, from the mountain tower⁵
When the Wild Night Huntsman past
And the roar of the stormy chase went by,
Through the dark unquiet sky !

The deer sprang up from their mossy beds,
When they caught the piercing sounds,
And the oak-boughs crash'd to their antlered
heads,
As they flew from the viewless hounds ;
And the falcon soar'd from her craggy height,
Away through the rushing night !

From the chieftain's hand the wine-cup fell,
At the banquet's festive board,
And a sudden pause came o'er the swell
Of the harp's triumphal chord :
And the *minnesingers*⁶ joyous lay
In the hall died fast away.

The convent's chaunted rite was stayed,
And the hermit dropp'd his beads,
And the forest rang through its deepest shade,
With the neigh of the phantom steeds ;
And the church-bells pealed to the rocking blast,
As the Wild Night-Huntsman past !

The storm has swept with the chase away,
There is stillness in the sky ;
But the mother looks on her son to-day
With a troubled heart and eye,
And the maiden's brow hath a shade of care
'Midst the gleam of her golden hair !

The Rhine flows bright, but its waves, 'ere long,
Must hear a voice of war,
And a clash of spears our hills among,
And a trumpet from afar ;
And the brave on a bloody turf must lie,
For the Wild Night Huntsman [sic] hath gone
by!⁷

⁵ There is a footnote here in the original text:
"The ruined castle of Rodenstein whence the
Wild Huntsman is supposed to issue with his
phantom train, and traverse the air to the
opposite castle of Schnellerts."

⁶ There is a footnote here in the original text:
"*Minnesingers*,--love singers ; wandering
minstrels of Germany."

⁷ There is a footnote here in the original text: "It
is a popular belief in the Odenwald that the
passing of the *Wild Huntsman* announces the
approach of war."

“Halloo on horse, on foot, away!”

Shrill sounds the haughty Wildegrave’s horn,
High rears his steed, brooks no delay,
And pawing snuffs the gales of morn.
They’re off—the hounds loud opening cluster round,
With voices, whips, and horns the echoing hills resound.

Gilt by the Sunday morning’s ray,
His castle’s stately tow’rs appeared ;
The chimes and bell announce the day
Of prayer and rest – and distant heard
Are sounds of holy song, and pious lays
Of grateful mortals to their Maker’s praise.

Straight thro’ the church-yard’s sacred shade,
The impetuous Earl, ne’er heeding wrong,
Dashing o’er graves but newly made,
With whoop and halloo mars their song.
When sudden ! on his left a blood red-knight,
Another, clad in silver, took his right !

Say who these knights? What doth them bring?
The deep design the muse may guess ;
Blooming the one and mild as spring,
His looks internal peace confess:
The other dark, and of deportment proud,
Whose eyes flash’d lightning as from thunder-cloud

“Welcome ! well met ! –No other place,
Not heaven itself affords such joys:”
(The Wildegrave cried) “The noble chase
Surpasses all—Hark ! forward, boys!
Away !” Rising, he swung his cap around,
With voice and hand, then cheered each favourite hound.

“I’ll⁸ suits thy horn with holy lay,”
The fair knight spake with manner mild,
“Return: — no good you’ll reap this day
Your angel warns,” With looks most wild,
The other sternly cried, “Hunt on my lord—
Act like a prince—heed not that driveller’s word.”

“Well said my neighbour on the left,
Thou art a hero to my mind ;
Let those of gen’rous soul bereft,
With canting monks remain behind:”
“Yes, pious Sir, although it should not please,
Happen what may, this day I’ll hunt at ease.”

Field in and out, hill up and down,
Still rushing forward, on they fly
O’er verdant lawns, o’er moors so brown ;
The rival knights still follow nigh,
See ! from yon brake a milk-white stag they rouse,
Mark well his size—observe his branching brows.

And louder still the Earl’s horn blew,
And speedier still both horse and hound,
With wild uproar pursuing flew,
Some headlong fell, dashed to the ground.
“Go hurl to hell ! why should it me annoy?
Enow remain, my pleasure I’ll enjoy.”

Now prostrate in the ripening corn
The panting stag his form conceals ;
But vain his wiles, his hope forlorn,
His steamy scent his haunt reveals:
The farmer kneels ; — “Have mercy, prince, you’ll sure
Not harm the dear-bought earnings of the poor !”

The gentle knight now forward bears,
And offers counsel mild and good ;
But the red-knight derides his fears,
And fires him on to deeds of blood:
With scorn the generous dictates he declines,
And in the bad knight’s toils himself entwines.

⁸ This is [sic] in the text, but incorrect; it should be “ill”.

“Begone,” (he roared) “thou cursed clown” —
At him his panting steed he rears ;
“I swear my hounds shall hunt thee down,
If still thy clamours dim my ears,
My words to prove—Ho ! comrades dash along,
Sound well your whips, and let him feel the thong.”

He said, — ‘twas done, — with desperate bound,
O’er fence he flies, and close behind,
With action eager, horse and hound
Streaming pursue, like wintry wind.
The *suite* and pack dispersing quickly spread
Wide waste. Alas ! the farmer’s hopes are fled.

Now by the approaching din alarm’d,
O’er rocks and walls, o’er hill and dale,
Arous’d, close run, but yet unharm’d,
The stag attains a flowery dale,
And mingling with the peaceful herds, he tries
To shun the pack and lose its murderous cries.

The staunch hounds rush thro’ stream and flood.
Away they sweep thro’ wood and brake,
True to the scent and breathing blood,
Nor e’er the streaming track forsake.
Suppliant the trembling hind⁹ the Earl addressed,
And urged with lowly suit his just request.

“Mercy! dread lord ! some pity shew !
Reflect that in this pasture feed,
The orphan’s stock, the widow’s cow ;
Await, —the deer I’ll drive with speed ;
Spare to the poor their all, their only trust
In pity stay—be merciful and just.”

Again the good knight forward bears,
And offers counsel mild and good ;
Still the left man derides his fears,
And fires the Earl to deeds of blood:
With scorn the generous dictates he declines,
And in the bad knight’s toils himself entwines.¹⁰

⁹ Hind is another word for a farm labourer

“Villain to dare my sport delay!
Halloo ! brave dogs ! have at them ho !”
And every hound in furious way
Assailed the flock and laid it low.
“Vengeance and blood!” the mangled herdsman cries,
“ *Vengeance and blood !*” re-echoes to the skies !

Defiled with gore, all wet with foam,
The hart scarce clears the field of blood
With nerves unstrung, weak, faint, and blown,
He sinking reached the distant wood :
Into the inmost shade he breaks,
And in a hermit’s cell a refuge takes.

“Give o’er!” the holy hermit prayed,
“Nor God’s Asylum dare profane ;
To heaven his creatures cry for aid,
And think not Earl they cry in vain ;
Once more be warned by me, avert thy fate,
Perdition waits—Repent ere yet too late.”

Once more the good knight forward bears,
And offers counsel mild and good ;
But the left knight derides his fears,
And leads him on to deeds of blood:
With scorn the pious dictates he declines,
And in the *Demon’s*¹¹ toils himself entwines.

“Perdition here!—perdition there!
Avaunt !” he cried with threatening tone,
“*And if my game in heaven were,*
Thou doating [sic] fool ! I’d *hunt it down.*
Not thou, *not* God, *nor aught shall me annoy* —
Spite of ye all my pleasure I’ll enjoy:

¹⁰ It is worth noting here that this stanza is almost identical to a previous one, but not quite. The author is relying on formulaic language to emphasize parts of his story.

¹¹ Please note that all words bolded here are bolded in the original text.

“Forward ! halloo ! lead on my friends !

 He swings his whip, his horn he sounds ;
When lo ! the hermit’s cell descends,
 Behind him sink both men and hounds.
In lieu of all the clamour of the chase,
A dreadful silence, still as death, took place.

Appalled the Wildgrave looks around ;
 His whip he swings, —it makes no noise ;
He tries his horn, —it yields no sound ;
 He calls, but cannot hear his voice ;
His steed he strikes, —and spurs in vain he strove :
Fixed to the earth, it could no longer move.

Gloomy and dark the air appeared ;
 And darker yet, till like the grave ;
While dismal yells from far are heard,
 Like distant sea and dashing wave :
O’er head a blaze of light burst thro’ the gloom,
A voice, like thunder, thus proclaim’d his doom.

Thou tyrant fell ! of hellish mind,
 Who thus the Almighty pow’r defies,
Foe to the brute and human kind,
 Their wrongs and blood in judgment rise,
And dreadful summon thee to nature’s lord,
Where high the Avenger holds his flaming sword.

“Fly! monster, fly !—and *from this day*
 Be chas’d by Hell, till time be o’er,
That thy example may dismay
 Princes and kings for evermore ;
Who in their cruel sports for nothing care,
And neither creature nor creator spare.”

Aghast the Wildgrave shudd’ring stood,
 Scarce beats his heart, scarce heaves his breast,
And icy horrors freeze his blood—
 Blue vapours all the grove invest ;
Before him roar bleak blasts of thund’ring wind,
Whilst sulphurous storms of hail invade him from behind.

Around him sparks and flashes glow,
 With red, and green, and bluish flame ;
Against him fiery billows flow ;
 Within which demons darkling gleam:
Lo : from the gulph¹² a thousand hell-hounds rise,
With howl and yell, urged on by dismal cries.

By fear impelled he breaks away,
 And through the world loud screaming flies ;
The howling fiends pursue their prey,
 And in dire discord blend their cries.
By day they chase the Wildgrave under ground [sic],
At night in air is heard the horrid sound !

And oft at midnight's solemn hour,
 When thunders roll, and lightning's glare,
And sulph'rous hail-storms arrowy shower ;
 Whirlwind and storm uprend the air ;
When sheeted ghosts from out the grave
 Arise, and shrieking, dance around ;
The phantom race, on fiery wave,
 Rush thro' the skies with yelling sound.

With "Halloo ! forward ! hark ! away !
 We onward ride till judgment day !
We forward ride upon the blast,
 Scourged on by hell till time be past!"

Such the Wild Huntsman's hellish chase,
 That lasts till judgment's awful day ;
Which oft on high through airy space,
 Affrights the traveller on his way.

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¹² An old word for a gulch, chasm, opening in the ground.