



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

How Brave Walter Hunted Wolves

Andrew Lang

A little back from the high road there stands a house which is called 'Hemgard.' Perhaps you remember the two beautiful mountain ash trees by the reddish-brown palings, and the high gate, and the garden with the beautiful barberry bushes which are always the first to become green in spring, and which in summer are weighed down with their beautiful berries.

Behind the garden there is a hedge with tall aspens which rustle in the morning wind, behind the hedge is a road, behind the road is a wood, and behind the wood the wide world.

But on the other side of the garden there is a lake, and beyond the lake is a village, and all around stretch meadows and fields, now yellow, now green.

In the pretty house, which has white window-frames, a neat porch and clean steps, which are always strewn with finely-cut juniper leaves, Walter's parents live. His brother Frederick, his sister Lotta, old Lena, Jonas, Caro and Bravo, Putte and Murre, and Kuckeliku.

Caro lives in the dog house, Bravo in the stable, Putte with the stableman, Murre a little here and a little there, and Kuckeliku lives in the hen house, that is his kingdom.

Walter is six years old, and he must soon begin to go to school. He cannot read yet, but he can do many other things. He can turn cartwheels, stand on his head, ride see-saw, throw snowballs, play ball, crow like a cock, eat bread and butter and drink sour milk, tear his trousers, wear holes in his elbows, break the crockery in pieces, throw balls through the windowpanes, draw old men on important papers, walk over the flower-beds, eat himself sick with gooseberries, and be well after a whipping. For the rest he has a good heart but a bad memory, and forgets his father's and his mother's admonitions, and so often gets into trouble and meets with adventures, as you shall hear, but first of all I must tell you how brave he was and how he hunted wolves.

Once in the spring, a little before Midsummer, Walter heard that there were a great many wolves in the wood, and that pleased him. He was wonderfully brave when he was in the midst of his companions or at home with his brothers and sister, then he used often to say 'One wolf is nothing, there ought to be at least four.'

When he wrestled with Klas Bogenstrom or Frithiof Waderfelt and struck them in the back, he would say: 'That is what I shall do to a wolf!' and when he shot arrows at Jonas and they rattled against his sheepskin coat he would say 'That is how I should shoot you if you were a wolf!'

Indeed, some thought that the brave boy boasted a little; but one must indeed believe him since he said so himself. So Jonas and Lena used to say of him 'Look, there goes Walter, who shoots the wolves.' And other boys and girls would say: 'Look, there goes brave Walter who is brave enough to fight with four.'

There was no one so fully convinced of this as Walter himself, and one day he prepared himself for a real wolf hunt. He took with him his drum, which had holes in one end, since the time he had climbed up on it to reach a cluster of rowan berries, and his tin sabre, which was a little broken because he had with incredible courage fought his way through a whole unfriendly army of gooseberry bushes.

He did not forget to arm himself quite to the teeth with his pop-gun, his bow, and his air-pistol. He had a burnt cork in his pocket to blacken his moustache, and a red cock's feather to put in his cap to make himself look fierce. He had besides in his trouser pocket a clasp-knife with a bone handle, to cut off the ears of the wolves as soon as he had killed them, for he thought it would be cruel to do that while they were still living.

It was such a good thing that Jonas was going with corn to the mill, for Walter got a seat on the load, while Caro ran barking beside them. As soon as they came to the wood Walter looked cautiously around him to see perchance there was a wolf in the bushes, and he did not omit to ask Jonas if wolves were afraid of a drum. 'Of course they are' (that is understood) said Jonas. Thereupon Walter began to beat his drum with all his might while they were going through the wood.

When they came to the mill Walter immediately asked if there had been any wolves in the neighbourhood lately.

'Alas! yes,' said the miller, 'last night the wolves have eaten our fattest ram there by the kiln not far from here.'

'Ah!' said Walter, 'do you think that there were many?'

'We don't know,' answered the miller.

'Oh, it is all the same,' said Walter. 'I only asked so that I should know if I should take Jonas with me.'

'I could manage very well alone with three, but if there were more, I might not have time to kill them all before they ran away.'

'In Walter's place I should go quite alone, it is more manly,' said Jonas.

'No, it is better for you to come, too,' said Walter. 'Perhaps there are many.'

'No, I have not time,' said Jonas, 'and besides there are sure not to be more than three. Walter can manage them very well alone.'

'Yes,' said Walter, 'certainly I could; but, you see, Jonas, it might happen that one of them might bite me in the back, and I should have more trouble in killing them. If I only knew that there were not more than two I should not mind, for then I should take one in each hand and give them a good shaking, like Susanna once shook me.'

'I certainly think that there will not be more than two,' said Jonas, 'there are never more than two when they slay children and rams; Walter can very well shake them without me.'

'But, you see Jonas,' said Walter, 'if there are two, it might still happen that one of them escapes and bites me in the leg, for you see I am not so strong in the left hand as in the right. You can very well come with me, and take a good stick in case there are really two. Look, if there is only one, I shall take him so with both my hands and throw him living on to his back, and he can kick as much as he likes, I shall hold him fast.'

'Now, when I really think over the thing,' said Jonas, 'I am almost sure there will not be more than one. What would two do with one ram? There will certainly not be more than one.'

'But you should come with me all the same, Jonas,' said Walter. 'You see I can very well manage one, but I am not quite accustomed to wolves yet, and he might tear holes in my new trousers.'

'Well, just listen,' said Jonas, 'I am beginning to think that Walter is not so brave as people say. First of all Walter would fight against four, and then against three, then two, and then one, and now Walter wants help with one. Such a thing must never be; what would people say? Perhaps they would think that Walter is a coward?'

'That's a lie,' said Walter, 'I am not at all frightened, but it is more amusing when there are two. I only want someone who will see how I strike the wolf and how the dust flies out of his skin.'

'Well, then, Walter can take the miller's little Lisa with him. She can sit on a stone and look on,' said Jonas.

'No, she would certainly be frightened,' said Walter, 'and how would it do for a girl to go wolf-hunting? Come with me, Jonas, and you shall have the skin, and I will be content with the ears and the tail.'

'No, thank you,' said Jonas, 'Walter can keep the skin for himself. Now I see quite well that he is frightened. Fie, shame on him!'

This touched Walter's pride very near. 'I shall show that I am not frightened,' he said; and so he took his drum, sabre, cock's feather, clasp-knife, pop-gun and air-pistol, and went off quite alone to the wood to hunt wolves.

It was a beautiful evening, and the birds were singing in all the branches. Walter went very slowly and cautiously. At every step he looked all round him to see if perchance there was anything lurking behind the stones. He quite thought something moved away there in the ditch. Perhaps it was a wolf. It is better for me to beat the drum a little before I go there, thought Walter.



Br-r-r, so he began to beat his drum. Then something moved again. Caw! caw! a crow flew up from the ditch. Walter immediately regained courage. 'It was well I took my drum with me,' he thought, and went straight on with courageous steps. Very soon he came quite close to the kiln, where the wolves had killed the ram. But the nearer he came the more dreadful he thought the kiln looked. It was so grey and old. Who knew how many wolves there might be hidden there? Perhaps the very ones which killed the ram were still sitting there in a corner. Yes, it was not at all safe here, and there were no other people to be seen in the neighbourhood. It would be horrible to be eaten up here in the daylight, thought Walter to himself; and the more he thought about it the uglier and grayer the old kiln looked, and the more horrible and dreadful it seemed to become the food of wolves.

'Shall I go back and say that I struck one wolf and it escaped?' thought Walter. 'Fie!' said his conscience, 'Do you not remember that a lie is one of the worst sins, both in the sight of God and man? If you tell a lie to-day and say you struck a wolf, to-morrow surely it will eat you up.'

'No, I will go to the kiln,' thought Walter, and so he went. But he did not go quite near. He went only so near that he could see the ram's blood which coloured the grass red, and some tufts of wool which the wolves had torn from the back of the poor animal.

It looked so dreadful.

'I wonder what the ram thought when they ate him up,' thought Walter to

himself; and just then a cold shiver ran through him from his collar right down to his boots.

'It is better for me to beat the drum,' he thought to himself again, and so he began to beat it. But it sounded horrid, and an echo came out from the kiln that seemed almost like the howl of a wolf. The drum-sticks stiffened in Walter's hands, and he thought now they are coming!

Yes, sure enough, just then a shaggy, reddish-brown wolf's head looked out from under the kiln!

What did Walter do now? Yes, the brave Walter who alone could manage four, threw his drum far away, took to his heels and ran, and ran as fast as he could back to the mill.

But, alas! the wolf ran after him. Walter looked back; the wolf was quicker than he and only a few steps behind him. Then Walter ran faster. But fear got the better of him, he neither heard nor saw anything more. He ran over sticks, stones and ditches; he lost drum-sticks, sabre, bow, and air-pistol, and in his terrible hurry he tripped over a tuft of grass. There he lay, and the wolf jumped on to him...

It was a gruesome tale! Now you may well believe that it was all over with Walter and all his adventures. That would have been a pity. But do not be surprised if it was not quite so bad as that, for the wolf was quite a friendly one. He certainly jumped on to Walter, but he only shook his coat and rubbed his nose against his face; and Walter shrieked. Yes, he shrieked terribly!

Happily Jonas heard his cry of distress, for Walter was quite near the mill now, and he ran and helped him up.

'What has happened?' he asked. 'Why did Walter scream so terribly?'

'A wolf! A wolf!' cried Walter, and that was all he could say.

'Where is the wolf?' said Jonas, 'I don't see any wolf.'

'Take care, he is here, he has bitten me to death,' groaned Walter.

Then Jonas began to laugh; yes, he laughed so that he nearly burst his skin belt.

Well, well, was that the wolf? Was that the wolf which Walter was to take by the neck and shake and throw down on its back, no matter how much it struggled? Just look a little closer at him, he is your old friend, your own good old Caro. I quite expect he found a leg of the ram in the kiln. When Walter beat his drum, Caro crept out, and when Walter ran away, Caro ran after him, as he so often does when Walter wants to romp and play.

'Down, Caro, you ought to be rather ashamed to have put such a great hero to

flight!'

Walter got up feeling very foolish.

'Down, Caro!' he said, both relieved and annoyed.

'It was only a dog, then if it had been a wolf I certainly should have killed him.'

'If Walter would listen to my advice, and boast a little less, and do a little more,' said Jonas, consolingly. 'Walter is not a coward is he?'

'You shall see Jonas when we next meet a bear. You see I like so much better to fight with bears.'

'Indeed!' laughed Jonas. 'Are you at it again?'

'Dear Walter, remember that it is only cowards who boast; a really brave man never talks of his bravery.'

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