

Iron John

Even though the wild man as a masculine archetype has largely disappeared from western culture, we do not have to go back too far in our history to find traces of it. The classic story being used by men's groups today is from *Grimm's Fairy Tales*: the story of Iron John, or Eisenhans, as he is called in German. I have summarized the story below.

Once upon a time there lived a king whose castle was right next to a large forest where all sorts of game roamed about. One day he sent a royal hunter into the forest to shoot a deer, but the hunter did not return.

"Perhaps he had an accident," thought the king, so the very next day he sent two other hunters into the forest to look for the one who was missing, but they did not come back, either. On the third day he gathered all the royal hunters together and instructed them, "Search the entire forest and do not return until you have found the three missing men." But all these hunters, too, like the first three, never came back. Even the hunting dogs they had taken into the forest were never seen again.

From that day forward, no one dared venture into the forest nor did they see anything moving except for an occasional eagle or hawk flying above. The forest lay completely still and silent. This state of affairs went on for years, until one day a hunter from a distant land asked the king if he could look for game in the royal forest. Remembering what had happened to the missing men, the king was reluctant to grant the request. He told the hunter, "I am very afraid that if you went into the dangerous forest you would fare no better than the others, and that you would never get out of it alive." To which the hunter replied, "My lord, I do not know the meaning of fear. I will gladly face the danger."

Into the forest strode the hunter with his hound. It was not long before the dog picked up the scent of a deer and barked for the hunter to follow him. Then the dog ran ahead, until he came to the edge of a pool of water that was so deep he hesitated before trying to cross it. Suddenly, a bare arm reached up out of the dark pond, grabbed the hound and pulled him under.

When the hunter saw what had happened, he ran back to the castle and got three men with buckets to empty all the water out of the pond. They worked hard for many hours, and as the dark waters began to be drained away, they beheld a wild man lying on the bottom. His body was covered with hair the color of rusted iron. The hunter and his helpers bound the wild man with ropes and dragged him off to the castle.

The sight of the wild man caused great wonder and alarm, so the king had him locked in an iron cage in the middle of the courtyard. He forbade anyone under threat of exile to open the door to the cage, and he entrusted the key to no one less than the queen herself. And from then on, anyone could again go safely into the forest.

Now, the king had a son who was eight years old, and one day when the prince was playing in the courtyard with his golden ball, the ball bounced into the iron cage. "Give me back my ball," said the boy. "Not until you open the door for me," answered the wild man. "No," said the boy, "I dare not do that. The king has forbidden it." And with that, he ran away.

The very next day, however, the boy came back and demanded his ball again. Again the wild man said, "Open the door for me." But the boy would not do it. On the third day, the king went off on a hunt. His son came back yet again, and this time he said, "Even if I wanted to, I could not open the door because I do not have the key." To which the wild man replied, "It is lying under your mother's pillow. You can surely get it." Upon hearing this, the boy threw all care to the wind, for he really wanted his ball, and stole the key.

The young prince returned shortly and unfastened the lock, but as he pulled the heavy door open, it pinched his finger. As soon as the door swung open, the wild man stepped out, gave the boy his golden ball and started to hurry away. But the boy was frightened, and he called after him, "Oh, wild man, if you run away I shall be punished! Please don't run away!" Whereupon the wild man turned around and came back. He picked the boy up, sat him on his shoulders and carried him off into the forest.