

The Curse of the Ring

***The Ring of the Nibelung* by Richard Wagner**

The story told in prose

Introduction

Richard Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* has been successfully performed by actors as a rehearsed reading, without the music. Indeed, Wagner himself habitually read his own 'poem', as he called it, to invited audiences.

The version that follows goes further in reduction, setting down the action in plain prose. The aim is to tell the story – the origin of the work – without the music, in order to give Wagner's text the attention it deserves, so as to enhance the understanding and pleasure of the whole.

The narrative style adopted here at the beginning of *Rhinegold* indicates that this prose version was originally conceived for children. However, it very soon became clear that it would best be told as the great fairy story it is, 'for children of all ages'.

Wagner called his work 'music drama', not opera. Even though the effect of the music is bound to be more powerful than the words, an understanding of them is essential for the understanding of the whole, not least for the appreciation of the music.

Because it is not a translation, nor even a synopsis, but a telling of the storyline as it unfolds, three scenes of the work that concern the portrayal and development of character without furthering the dramatic action have been omitted. Two occur in *Siegfried* – the scenes between Alberich and Mime in Act Two, and between Erda and Wotan in Act Three. The third is Alberich's scene with Hagen in Act Two of *The Twilight of the Gods*. Emphasis throughout remains on the movement of the elaborate but never obscure story.

This telling of the story of Wagner's *Ring* has been its own reward. Wagner's words, especially as they conjure up the music, evoke the work's power, poetry, depth and dramatic momentum. It was therefore sometimes difficult to resist the magnetism of the last and greatest of its four parts and be drawn too quickly towards its climax and resolution.

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N.B. The chapters into which this prose version is divided do not necessarily correspond to the scenes and acts of the original.

*'Oh limèd soul that struggling to be free
Art more engaged!'*

'Hamlet', Act 3

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1. Rhinegold

Characters

Three Rhinemaidens

Alberich, Lord of the Nibelungs

Mime, Alberich's brother, a Nibelung

Wotan, Father of the Gods

Fricka, his wife

Freia, her sister

Donner and Froh, their brothers, Gods of Thunder and Youth

Fasolt and Fafner, giants, builders of Valhalla

Loge, God of Fire

Erda, Earth Goddess, wisest of women

Chapter One

In olden times there was a golden treasure so beautiful that it had to be hidden deep in the River Rhine so that it would not be stolen. It lay at the bottom of the great river like a large rock, taking the colour of the water, the weeds and the water-plants around it. And when the rays of the sun pierced the water, the gold glinted and glittered as only gold can.

This gold came to be known as the Rhinegold and it was guarded by three water nymphs, or nixies, who spent their time playing in the river, watching for thieves.

One day, a strange and ugly man crawled up to them from under the river, from the land of Nibelheim. He looked like a frog, was bow-legged and rather squat. He said he had been watching them for some time, and now wanted to love one of them.

The very idea seemed so ridiculous, the three Rhinemaidens could only giggle and laugh. Then they decided to tease him. One by one, they stroked him and pretended

they liked and even loved him. But as soon as he believed them and began hoping, they called him ugly, horrid and said he was like a toad.

At this, Alberich – for that was the man's name, a Nibelung – grew angry and wanted to take revenge on the beautiful nymphs.

This all happened as day dawned. When the sun rose, while the water-nymphs swam round the precious rock – which they did every morning – the sun's rays struck it and it glinted and glittered, as only gold can. Then the Rhinemaidens began a thanksgiving water-dance, and even began to sing underwater.

Alberich was amazed, and even more surprised when he saw the glinting and glittering golden rock. He had never seen anything like it before and asked the nymphs what it was. They explained that it was the magical Rhinegold. If any man or woman could make a Ring out of it, that man or woman would rule the whole world.

What a terrible thing it would be, they all thought, if Alberich were to steal the gold. But then they remembered that the magic Ring made from the magic gold could only cast its almighty spell if the person who made it turned their back for ever on love – in fact, completely renounced it.

So they were sure that Alberich was no danger, because he had wanted to love all three of them, one by one, and certainly did not seem to be someone who could turn his back on love. In any case – they knew – all that lives must love, because love is what makes the world go round.

As he had been teasingly rejected and mocked by the three Rhinemaidens, the thought of ruling the whole world seemed wonderful to Alberich. He would have what he wanted and do as he liked. What did he need love for? His love had been rejected anyway. If he took the gold and rejected love, and even put a curse on it, the world would be his. What sweet revenge that would be on the Rhinemaidens who had mocked and teased him!

While he was thinking this, he was creeping closer and closer to the gold. Then with one grab, he took it in his short, strong arms. Immediately it stopped glinting and glittering. The sun went out. The world changed. Darkness fell.

Alberich not only turned his back on love – and he looked away from the Rhinemaidens – but he pronounced a terrible curse upon it, so that he would never feel love again, and would have to live without it, which no man or woman had ever done before.

The Rhinemaidens cried, 'Stop thief!' and shouted for help. But who could hear them from the bottom of the great river? In any case, there was no one else there.

Chapter Two

On a broad green, grassy bank, opposite a beautiful castle that looked newly built, were two people. One was a tall man who was lying asleep, snoring a little. The other was a woman, also tall, who woke with a start.

She was Fricka and she awoke her husband, giving him a jolt, saying, 'Wake up, Wotan! What are we going to do? The castle is finished and you promised the two

giants who built it my own sister Freia as reward. We have got to find something else to pay them with – a ransom. Otherwise they will take her – and I think one of them is a little bit in love with her already.'

At that very moment, Freia came running to them, crying, imploring for help. And almost on her heels came the two builders, one a gentle giant called Fasolt, the other, much rougher, called Fafner.

Freia's brothers Donner and Froh wanted to rescue her with violence, but Wotan stopped them and appealed to the power of his spear.

Fasolt explained that the castle was finished, and they had come to collect Freia, the reward that had been agreed.

Wotan knew that this was true, but he pretended it had been a joke. Under his breath, he kept on saying, 'Oh, where is Loge? Where the devil is Loge?'

Loge could do magic, and Wotan had already told him to find something as valuable to a man as woman's love, so that it could be given to the giants in place of Freia. However, Loge was nowhere to be found, and Fafner said they would take Freia away with them, in which case the gods would slowly starve, because only Freia knew how to grow the golden apples which were the secret of the gods' eternal youth.

Just at that moment, Loge appeared – a neat little man with a red waistcoat, pointed black beard, and black patent-leather shoes.

The first thing he did was to inspect the castle. He had a measuring stick and a hammer. He made sure that everything was the right size, and he sometimes tapped a brick or a beam with his hammer to see if it sounded right, or moved. Nothing did move. Nothing even wobbled. The giants had done their job well and had earned their reward.

'But,' Wotan said to Loge, 'you know very well I would never have agreed to Freia being the reward if you hadn't promised to find a replacement for her.'

'Yes,' answered Loge, his face turning the same colour as his waistcoat, 'I did promise to try, but things haven't quite worked out as I thought. You see, I have looked everywhere – in fact, I've been twice round the world, length and breadth, far and wide – and have to report that there is nothing for man in the whole wide world that can take the place of woman's beauty and love.'

Everyone fell silent. Fricka looked at Wotan, Wotan looked at the ground, Fasolt looked at Freia, who was looking at Fricka. Fafner was looking angrily at Loge, who was twiddling his thumbs.

'However,' Loge started up again, 'I do know one man for whom something did take the place of woman's beauty and love. He is Alberich the Nibelung, and he has actually given up love, given up the beauty of women, for nothing but a golden rock. Such gold must now have amazing value. Alberich stole that gold from the Rhinemaidens. They asked me for your help in getting it back, and I promised them to tell you this.'

Wotan continued to look at the ground and said, 'How can I possibly help others when I need help myself?'

Loge then said, 'Yes, I know about the Rhinegold, and that – if a Ring is made from it – its master or mistress could rule the whole world.'

'Do you think it would make a nice bracelet for me?' whispered Fricka to Loge.

'More than that,' said Loge. 'If she winningly wore such a bright jewel, made under a spell by the Nibelung dwarfs, a wife might even keep her husband for herself.'

'Could my own husband get the gold for himself?' said Fricka teasingly.

'I must have that Ring,' cried Wotan.

'But it will be no use to you,' said Loge. 'You won't give up love. But if Alberich has given up love, and we steal the Ring from him, perhaps it will keep its magic. The best thing would be for you to tell Alberich to give the gold back to the Rhinemaidens.'

'But', said Wotan, 'that wouldn't do me any good at all.'

'Stop this bickering,' interrupted Fafner angrily. 'We'll accept the gold if you can get it by this evening. Until then Freia is coming with us.'

And off they went, up hills and mountains, down valleys, along rivers. Freia was brave, but she was frightened because she didn't know where she was going. She noticed that Fasolt was gentler than his brother, and felt he would not let her come to any harm.

Meanwhile, the gods, without Freia's golden apples, were beginning to wrinkle and go a little grey. The gold had to be ready for the giants by that very evening. So Wotan and Loge left straightaway for Nibelheim, the country of Alberich and the Nibelungs, deep under the river Rhine, and soon disappeared down a deep crevasse – the most dangerous, but also the quickest way there.

Chapter Three

Deep underground, Wotan and Loge grew nearer to the gloomy country of Nibelheim, perpetually shrouded in mist and fog. They smelt the rotten-egg smell of burning sulphur, and heard a hard ringing sound, which turned out to be hundreds of hammers, wielded by hundreds of dwarfs, hammering gold into hundreds of rectangular ingots.

Hassling and hustling the dwarfs, with what looked like a nasty cattle-prod, was a dwarf-like creature, Mime, who looked like a frog or toad and wore a perpetually worried expression. Behind him, looking quite large in comparison, came his brother, the King of Nibelheim himself, Alberich. He was dressed in a brand-new, zip-up black leather suit and carried a long whip. And that was all just as he wanted, because the magic Ring on his finger that he had made out of the gold gave him anything he desired. This included a magic Hiding-helmet. If you put it on your head, you could become anything you wanted – animal, vegetable or mineral, or just a puff of smoke – just like that!

Wotan wore a broad-brimmed hat and a long grey coat, just right for Nibelheim, but Loge's red-waistcoat and shiny shoes looked rather out of place.

They looked at the pile of gold nuggets and ingots, all belonging to Alberich, and each could tell what the other was thinking – namely, how to lift all that gold to the earth's surface to give to the giants and save Freia.

Then Loge saw the Ring on Alberich's finger, and had an idea.

'Hail fellow, well met!' Loge said to Alberich, and – pretending not to notice the Ring – asked, 'What's that funny-looking thing hanging from your golden belt?'

'No one is welcome here,' answered Alberich, 'but – seeing as you ask – it is my Hiding-helmet, which can turn me into anything I want – animal, vegetable or mineral – just like that.'

'I doubt that is possible,' said Loge. 'For instance, you couldn't possibly turn into an enormous dragon, say three times as big as yourself, could you?'

And almost before Loge could catch Wotan's eye, Alberich turned into an enormous green dragon, with flashing eyes, a tongue forked like a viper, and a thrashing tail.

'Ye gods!' cried Loge, 'I believe you now, but can you turn yourself back?'

And suddenly Alberich returned, with a rather sly grin on his face.

'Astonishing!' said Loge. 'I don't suppose it would be possible for you to turn yourself into a little toad six times as small as yourself, would it? Just to show us you can make yourself small as well as big. It would be easier to prevent treasure being stolen that way.'

'Of cour . . .', and before he finished the word, Alberich disappeared and a tiny little toad hopped about the floor. Wotan put his foot on it, scooped it up with one hand, and Loge tied a fibre noose round its little neck. Almost immediately, Alberich turned himself back again, but this time he was a captive. Not even the magic Ring could help him. He had to do what his captors told him.

This was to tell his unfortunate brother, Mime, to use his cattle-prod to make the Nibelung dwarf-smithies carry up all the golden ingots, behind Wotan, Loge and his captive self, to the earth's surface.

Alberich – Lord of the Nibelungs – had never been a prisoner in his life, and had just enjoyed a period of unlimited freedom and power. He knew he had been a fool in allowing himself to be tricked by Wotan and Loge, and that he would have to pay for that folly. As he heard the chink of the last of the gold ingots being piled up beside him by the Nibelungs, he knew what that payment would be. 'Let them have the gold,' he thought, 'as long as I can keep the Ring!'

'I demand my freedom,' he cried.

'And you shall have it, dear Alberich, on payment of every gold ingot in that pile,' answered Loge.

Alberich suspected as much, pretended to be angry, but underneath was strangely calm. 'As long,' he repeated to himself, 'as the Ring is mine, I'll be all right, because

the Ring and my renunciation of love give me power over the whole world, so I can easily go and find some more gold, or – just as easily – even make some.’

So Alberich told the Nibelungs to make a tidy pile of the gold for Wotan, but asked Loge kindly to return the Hiding-helmet he still held in his hand.

‘No,’ answered Loge. ‘That’s part of your ransom, too. You won’t be freed without handing it over!’ This gave Alberich a twinge of worry about the Ring. Precisely at that moment, he heard Wotan’s voice say, ‘What’s that Ring round your finger? Isn’t that part of the gold, too? Hand it over!’

‘My life, but not the Ring!’ exclaimed Alberich.

‘Give me the Ring!’ said Wotan. ‘You can do what you like with your life. You stole the gold yourself from the Rhinemaidens, from the bed of the river.’

‘That is true,’ answered Alberich, ‘but I had nothing then, and I made the great sacrifice of giving up love forever to benefit from the gold, until then lying useless and harmless at the bottom of the great river Rhine. If you steal from me what I have made that sacrifice for, your theft will be greater than mine, because I stole only at my own expense, whereas your theft will be common thieving. Everyone will suffer from that example, not just yourself.’

Despite this truthful plea, Wotan crudely manhandled Alberich, who looked small beside him, and tore the Ring from his finger.

‘Set him free!’ he shouted to Loge.

‘Off you go – on your way!’ cried Loge.

‘Oh, no,’ said Alberich, ‘I am not free, and I haven’t finished with you yet. Just as I came by the power of that Ring through a curse on love, so shall I leave it, not only with that curse still intact, but with an additional curse. Whoever possesses the Ring will be consumed by woe, and whoever does not will be consumed by envy. I pronounce a curse of *death* on whoever shall wear it. Any Lord of the Ring shall henceforth be also slave to the Ring, until it is returned to me. Until then I bless and curse you all.’

‘What a charming love song,’ was Loge’s only comment.

‘Let him stew in his own juice!’ said Wotan, with a self-satisfied smile, which didn’t last long, for he soon saw Fasolt and Fafner, dragging Freia behind them. Fricka, Donner and Froh also appeared, thinking that Freia would be freed.

Now came the bad part. All the gold, for which Alberich had renounced love, and which – according to Loge – was therefore the only thing equal to woman’s love – was to be given to the giants, in order to ransom Freia.

Curiously enough – and not for the last time – Wotan had the same thought as Alberich – ‘If I can only keep hold of the Ring. I’ll be all right.’

The gentle Fasolt, whose love for Freia had grown ever stronger, could not bear to look at her as soon as he heard he was going to lose her. So the giants made Freia stand tall, and told Wotan and Loge that she would not be free until they could no longer see any part of her. The gold ingots had to hide her body completely.

By now the Nibelung dwarfs had disappeared with Alberich, so Donner, Froh and Loge piled up the ingots. Though there were fewer of them, their hands were much bigger than the dwarfs', and they soon finished.

Wotan felt a little dizzy with success. What could possibly go wrong now?

Fasolt and Fafner first tried to see Freia behind the pile of gold. Fafner saw her curly hair through a chink, but there were no ingots left to fill it. Looking around, he noticed the Hiding-helmet, which Loge was holding behind his back.

'We'll need that, if you're to have Freia,' said Fafner. Loge looked at Wotan, who nodded, and Loge handed the helmet over. Freia's curly hair could be seen no longer.

Then the giants stood up, and Fasolt's legs went wobbly, because the pile of gold took the exact form of Freia's body, which made him go weak at the knees. What is more, from another chink he could still see one of her eyes. It was closed and tearful, and he cried out: 'As long as I can see that lovely eye, I cannot give up this woman.'

This time there really did seem to be no gold left, until Fafner noticed the Ring on Wotan's finger. 'We'll need that too,' he said, 'if you want your Freia.'

'But,' explained Loge, 'I'd like to point out that all this gold actually belongs to the Rhinemaidens, and Wotan intends to return it to them.'

'Over my dead body,' said Wotan quickly. 'I'm keeping this for myself now. Your promise to the Rhinemaidens to get it back for them wasn't mine. Finding's keeping!'

'But not for long,' said Fafner. 'The gold is all ransom for your sister-in-law now – every nugget.'

'Very well, take it,' said Wotan, angrily. 'But you're not having the Ring – never ever!'

'In that case, say goodbye to Freia,' replied Fafner.

And a loud chorus of misery was to be heard from Fricka, Donner, Froh and – not least – from Freia herself. 'Give it up,' they cried. 'Give up the Ring, otherwise we shall all die without Freia and her golden apples.'

'Never ever,' exclaimed Wotan. 'I will never give up the Ring.'

He had hardly finished speaking, when there was a low roll of thunder and a blue-lit cavern opened up in the ground in front of him. Out of it, as if from under the earth, stepped a tall, handsome woman in a smoky blue dress and cloak. She looked Wotan very firmly in the eye and said to him in a low but strong voice. 'You must give the Ring up, Wotan. Give it up. Yield! You know who I am, Erda, the world's wisest woman. I know how the world began and I know how it will end. A dark day dawns for the gods. The Ring must be given to the giants.'

Wotan thought long, Donner called back the giants, leaving with Freia, who turned despairingly to Wotan and asked, 'Do you really want me back?'

Wotan fought with himself for moments that seemed like several minutes. Then he threw down the Ring where Freia stood like a golden statue, opened his arms, and cried:

'Come to me, Freia. You are free, and so are we all, and we'll find our youth again with your golden apples. Farewell, Fafner and Fasolt, and good riddance!'

Freia and Fricka were delighted with Wotan, but there was to be no happy farewell for the giants. As soon as they had taken possession of the gold, they started a bitter argument. Fafner said that because Fasolt had loved Freia, he had had more than his share of her, and that therefore he, Fafner, should have a larger share of the gold, and the Ring. Loge told Fasolt to let the gold go to Fafner, but to hang on to the Ring. A battle of tongues became a battle of fists, which became a battle of weapons. In short, the gentler Fasolt was killed outright by his brutal twin, and became the first victim of Alberich's curse.

'O, horror!' said Wotan, contemplating Fasolt's dead body. He felt he should consult Erda again, but Fricka stopped him from going to her, and turned to their new castle, Valhalla. Persuaded by her triumphant brothers, Froh and Donner, Wotan joined in the celebrations.

When Fricka asked what Valhalla meant, Wotan answered, 'Victory of the Gods', as they all stepped on to the rainbow-bridge Loge had specially created for them. They already felt younger, elated and once again confident of the future.

Loge, however, thought otherwise. Had Wotan forgotten what he had done? Had he really forgotten whom the gold really belonged to? Are the gods really as safe as they think? Can they ever be happy?

And as the gods crossed the bridge, they heard sad singing below. It was the Rhinemaidens bewailing the theft of their gold.

'Wretched nixies,' said Wotan. 'Can't you stop them?' he asked Loge.

Loge tried, in his way. He told them to put up with losing the gold and to enjoy the shiny splendour of the gods instead.

'All that glitters is not gold,' sang the Rhinemaidens. 'Truth and trust lie here below. All above is death and doom.'

2. The Valkyrie

Characters

Sigmund (a Wälse), son of Wotan (when disguised as Wälse) and an unknown human mother

Sieglinde (a Wälse), his twin sister, Hunding's wife

Hunding, Neiding chief, Sieglinde's husband (by forced marriage)

Wotan, father of the Gods, also known as Wolf and Wälse

Brünnhilde, daughter of Wotan and Erda

Fricka, Wotan's wife

Eight Valkyries, daughters of Wotan with unknown mother

Chapter One

In the front room of a large old house a young but careworn woman, Sieglinde, was sitting. Suddenly, a desperate-looking young man burst in and almost collapsed onto the ground, crying 'Water! Water!' Sieglinde offered him a full drinking-horn, wondering who he was. As he handed it back his eyes looked ever more intently at her face.

He thanked her and asked her who she was. She explained that he was in Hunding's house and that she was his wife, and the laws of hospitality meant he could stay until Hunding's return.

'I'm weaponless,' the stranger replied, 'but your husband wouldn't attack a wounded guest.'

'What wounds?' asked Sieglinde. 'Show me at once!'

'Nothing serious,' said the stranger, and told how he had been involved in a battle in which his own weapons had let him down when he was on the point of defeating his enemies, and that they had hunted him to exhaustion, but that now he felt completely revived.

Sieglinde filled a drinking-horn with mead and handed it to him, sipping it herself first, according to custom. The stranger took a deep draught, after which they looked at each other with growing intensity, and she asked who was pursuing him.

He said that was a long story – that he was a cursed man, hunted down by another. He felt unwelcome and deeply unhappy.

'Well,' she replied, 'you are not unwelcome here, for this is a deeply unhappy house.'

'My name is Woeful,' said the stranger. 'I'll wait for Hunding here.'

Horse-hooves were heard outside, and the large figure of Hunding soon entered. He became angry with his wife when he discovered she had sheltered a stranger. But the stranger himself quickly reminded him of the rules of hospitality, accusing Hunding of being rough with his own wife.

'Very well,' said Hunding. 'Be welcome', and to his wife, 'Get supper for us men!'

Seeing the two of them, Hunding couldn't help noticing how much they resembled each other – their eyes seemed alike. Better find out more about him. So Hunding questioned the stranger, and Sieglinde joined in, asking first who he was.

He gave a strange answer. He said he couldn't be called either Peaceful or Happy, but must call himself Woeful. His father's name was Wolf, and he himself was born with a twin sister, who soon disappeared with their mother, so that he hardly remembered either of them.

Wolf was a warrior and a hunter, with many enemies. He used to take the boy hunting, and one day they returned home to find it empty, burnt to the ground, the

family oak-tree no more than a stump, mother beaten and burnt to ashes, sister gone. It bore all the mark of the Neiding clan.

There followed many years when father and son lived in the forest, often hunted by the Neidings.

Hunding said he thought he'd heard this wild story, even if he didn't know about Wolf and his young cub.

'Go on, stranger,' said Sieglinde. 'Where's your father now?'

And Woeful told how the Neidings started hunting him and his father again, how he was parted from his father, who then disappeared, leaving only a wolf's skin behind in the forest. Full of these horrors, he felt drawn to human men – and to human women. But things didn't go well. The more he searched for happiness, the sadder he became. That is why he was called Woeful. In one fight he even lost all his weapons.

A sad young girl had cried out for help. A clan wanted her to marry one of their men without wooing or love. 'I joined battle,' said Woeful. 'Her brothers died defending her. She clung onto them. I sheltered her until my weapons were smashed in my hands, and I saw that poor girl die, still clinging to her dead family's bodies.'

'Now, you know,' he said, looking at Sieglinde who'd asked him, 'why I'm not called Peaceful.'

Hunding's face had grown darker. He had recognized this story and knew that he hated having the Wölfin in his house. He had to follow the rules of hospitality for the rest of the day, but warned the stranger that he would fight him in the morning with heavy weapons. Then he turned to his wife and shouted, 'Leave the room! Get out of here! Make my night-drink, and wait till I call you to bed.'

Sieglinde kept calm. She went to the cupboard and made up the night-drink, adding a large amount of special spices. On her way out of the room, she turned and stared hard and longingly at the stranger, who had eyes only for her. Sieglinde stared meaningfully at the centre of the trunk of the ash tree in the middle of the room. Hunding noticed her delay and gestured at her angrily. She left the room with a candle and his night-drink.

Deepest night now fell. Only the fire's embers glowed in the dark. What was the stranger to do for a weapon? Then he recalled that his father had promised him he would find one when most in need. This must be the time. He had met the most wonderful woman, and she was in the power of a cruel man who had challenged him when weaponless. This must be his moment of being most in need.

Suddenly the embers moved in the grate, and their glow for a moment lit up that place in the ash-tree's trunk Sieglinde had looked at so meaningfully. He was sure the weapon was there. Her look had been like magic. But now the glow was gone. It was deepest night once more.

Suddenly, he heard a voice. 'Are you there?'

'Who's that?' he asked.

'It's me. Hunding's fast asleep. I gave him a sleeping draft. Quick – save your life!'

'You've already saved my life,' said the stranger.

It was true, and Sieglinde went on to assure him that she would show him a magic weapon, promised for the strongest of the strong. Oh, if only he could win it and become the greatest hero!

Sieglinde told him how Hunding had once invited his clan to sit in this very room and celebrate his marriage to an unwilling girl – herself – procured for money. She had sat there, wretched, while his men drank. Suddenly, a stranger entered, an old man in grey, hat-brim over one eye, the other blazing terror into those around him.

'Only in me,' continued Sieglinde, 'did that look have the effect of sweet sorrow, comfort and tears, all at once. Looking at me, his eye still blazing at the others, the old man swung a sword in his hand and thrust it deep into the ash-tree's trunk, and said the sword would belong to whoever pulled it free.'

Not one of those men, however strong they thought themselves, could do it. Guests, stronger and stronger, came and went. It didn't move an inch and is still there. Then I realized who it was who had looked at me so gravely, and I knew as well who the sword was destined for.'

Here Sieglinde broke off and seemed to be praying. She prayed that if only she could find that friend, come from afar to the most wretched of woman, all her suffering would be avenged, all she had lost and mourned would be brought back – if only she could find that precious friend and embrace such a hero!

It was at that very moment that the unknown guest enfolded her in a warm embrace.

'You, my dear woman, are now in the arms of the man for whom not only that sword is destined, but you as his wife. Whatever I've longed for I see in you. We have already shared our joys and our woes, for which we will now share sweet revenge. Oh, how happy I feel against your beating heart.'

'Oh, who was that?' cried Sieglinde, 'Who came in?'

The door behind them had blown open with a bang in the Spring night, letting the full moon flood the room so that Sieglinde and Siegmund could suddenly see each other for the first time.

'It was no one,' said the stranger. 'It was Spring itself. Just imagine winter storms giving way to Spring's mildness – and Spring in turn coming to look for his sister, Love, and . . .'

'But I myself am your Love and you are my Spring – your sister-bride who you have rescued. I always knew it was you, from that first look. When I saw my own reflection in the stream, I recognized your face, and when my voice echoed in the forest, I recognized yours. Are you sure your name's Woeful?'

'No! Not any more! Not now. Call me whatever you like. I'll take my name from you.'

'You said your father was Wolf.'

'Yes, it was to me – but his real name was 'Wälse'.

'So,' exclaimed Sieglinde, 'you're a Wälsung. It was for you that Wolf thrust that sword into the tree-trunk. So I will call you Siegmund.'

'Yes, Siegmund,' said the stranger, 'that's who I am.' And grasping the hilt of the sword, he drew it solemnly out of the trunk, and presented it to Sieglinde as his bridal gift. She was ecstatic with delight.

'With this sword you, Siegmund, have just won your own long lost sister as wife.'

'Yes, I know. Bride – and sister! Long live the Blood of the Wälsungs!

Chapter Two

The time had come for Siegmund to fight and kill Hunding and rescue his beloved Sieglinde from her forced marriage. His father Wotan had come to help him, armed with his Spear of God, and accompanied by Brünnhilde, his favourite among his warrior daughters, whose job it was to collect the dead bodies of heroes fallen in battle and bring them to Valhalla.

Wotan warned his daughter that they had a hard fight on their hands. Siegmund, the Wälsung must win – let Hunding go to the Devil.

'Father,' said Brünnhilde, 'I'm afraid you've a hard fight on your hands, too. Here comes Fricka, and she's spitting fire. I'll keep out of this one. I prefer fights between men. I'm leaving you in the lurch this time.'

'Oh dear, here comes the wife – trouble and strife,' thought Wotan.

'I heard you,' said Fricka. 'Have you forgotten I am the guardian of marriage? Hunding's told me what happened, and in the course of duty I promised to punish that scandalous pair who deceived a husband.'

'But what,' interrupted Wotan, 'can be wrong with Spring uniting a couple in love? They were enchanted by its magic, and who can resist such power?'

'So you *have* forgotten who and what I am,' said Fricka. 'The marriage vow is at stake. This cannot go unpunished.'

'For me, a vow's not a vow if it unites those who no longer love each other. You can't expect me to use my power to hold together what cannot be held. When strong feelings are aroused, my only counsel is, "Fight it out".'

'If,' replied Fricka, 'you think adultery is so fine, what about twincest? The mind boggles. When did it ever happen that siblings fell in love with each other like that?'

'You've just seen it happen,' said Wotan tenderly. 'Isn't that life?'

'So,' said Fricka, 'Here ends the reign of the immortal gods. Ever since you conceived those Wälsungs with that human woman – if that's what you did – everything's gone haywire. You were the first to break our vows. You surrounded yourself with your Valkyries, fruits of yet another woman, and Brünnhilde your favourite, all supposedly bound to me. But then you took to prowling the woods as Wälse, and fathered twin ordinary mortals, and now you throw them shamelessly in

my face. Why don't you just finish me off? Kick me in the teeth and have done with it?'

'I've always tried to teach you,' said Wotan, 'that there are things you simply cannot know until they happen. You stick to convention, while I long for the new.'

'Listen,' he continued. 'I need a hero free from our laws, who without the protection of the gods, can do something the gods need, but are not allowed to do themselves.'

'You think you can confuse me by your clever thoughts!' protested Fricka. 'What noble deeds could heroes possibly perform, if the gods who conferred that nobility on them were banned from doing them themselves?'

'And what about freedom?'

'Who gave it to them with their mother's milk?' asked Fricka. 'Who opened their eyes? And you can't pull the wool over mine. This so-called Wälsung is nothing but your own self.'

'He grew up in deep distress all by himself, never with my protection.'

'So, don't protect him now. Take away his sword.'

'His sword?'

'Yes, that magic shining sword a certain god gave his son.'

'But Siegmund's need for it won it for himself.'

'And you not only created that need, yourself thrust the sword into the tree-trunk, but cunningly lured him to find it. How could you do this to me!'

'What do you want me to do?'

'Leave the Wälsung alone,' replied Fricka.

'He must go his own way,' said Wotan.

'But don't protect him when Hunding calls for revenge.'

'I won't.'

'Look at me,' said Fricka menacingly. 'Don't try and get out of this. Don't allow the Valkyrie to protect him either.'

'Let the Valkyrie act as she wants.'

'No, no! She only carries out *your* will. Ban her from Siegmund's victory.'

'How can I kill the man who found the magic sword?'

'Take away its magic. But now I can hear your jubilant girl, storming towards us.'

'I called her to horse for Siegmund.'

Brünnhilde led her horse down the rocky path between the mountains where Fricka and Wotan were standing.

'Well,' said, Fricka, 'her job now is to defend my sacred honour. Only your own brave daughter now stands between me and disgrace. Siegmund must be the prize. Do you promise me?'

'I promise,' replied Wotan, in deep distress.

'The Father of War awaits you,' said Fricka triumphantly to Brünnhilde. 'He'll tell you the fate he has chosen.'

Chapter Three

Brünnhilde approached her downcast father. She could see that things had gone badly with Fricka. 'Father,' she said, 'what can you tell me?'

'I'm caught in a trap of my own making. I'm the least free person in the world. The shame, the sorrow, the anger! I must be the saddest creature of all.'

Brünnhilde threw down her weapons and sank to her father's feet.

'Father,' she said, 'you're frightening me. Trust me. I'll never leave you.'

Wotan wondered whether speaking his thoughts out loud would weaken his will.

As if she had read his thoughts, Brünnhilde said in a low voice, 'But it is to your own will you are speaking. When you tell me what you want, what am I if not your own will?'

'Yes,' said Wotan quietly, 'and when I speak to you I'm speaking only to myself.' And he went on to recall the bad things he had done in the past. The agreements he had broken with the giants who built Valhalla, and allowing himself to be tricked by Loge into stealing the Ring from Alberich, who laid a curse upon love – the very thing which he, Wotan, never ceased looking for.

Alberich had put a death curse on the Ring itself, too, and Wotan had paid off the giants with it to ransom Freia. As if gold could ever replace the love of a woman! Only the liar Loge had ever thought that! Erda, the wise one, had told him to give it back to the Rhinemaidens, from whom Alberich had stolen it, otherwise she predicted the world would come to an end. Then she had silently vanished.

'That threw me into a new darker mood,' continued Wotan. 'As a god, I craved knowledge and delved into the womb of the world, conquered the sibyl Erda, gained her wisdom through love, and she gave me a daughter. Yes, Brünnhilde, the world's wisest woman is your mother. I brought you up with your eight half-sister Valkyries, to bring fallen heroes to me in Valhalla, to help prevent the end of the world.'

'Oh, yes,' agreed Brünnhilde, 'we collected plenty of heroes – many I found myself. Why are you so worried?'

'It's something else Erda warned me about. The Nibelung Alberich is furious with me. I know we could beat him in battle, but if he ever recovered the Ring I stole from him,

he would use his curse both upon it and upon love to destroy Valhalla and bring eternal shame on the gods. So I must take the Ring from Fafner, the giant who killed his brother for it the moment I gave it to them to free Freia. But I paid off the murderer Fafner with the Ring I myself stole, so can never meet him again. I broke the very rules I made as a god, and made myself an outlaw – a slave to my own solemn agreements.'

Wotan, who had been sitting down, now stood up. He no longer looked at Brünnhilde, but seemed to stare into the distance.

'I am like a man trying to lift himself up by his own bootstraps. Only a hero acting alone, without any help from me, can do what I – even though a god – cannot do, because I am outside the law, an outlaw. He's got to do – without my help and with his own weapon – what I want but cannot do, and he's got to do it without knowing that I want him to, though I'm the only person who wants it done!'

Wotan looked at Brünnhilde, his most wished-for daughter, again and went on.

'How can I find someone who can fight for and against me at the same time – a kind of enemy-friend? How create a free man, unprotected by me, whose own interests are identical to mine? How can I create that Other Creature, separate from me, but who wants exactly what I want? Help me, ye gods! The horrible shame of it! In all that I do, I find to my horror only ever myself. That Other Creature I crave I will never find. A free man has to create himself. I can only create slaves.'

Her father was clearly upset, but Brünnhilde kept calm.

'What about Siegmund, the Wälsung,' she said. 'Isn't he a free man?'

'There's a problem,' said Wotan. 'I roamed the forest with him, and encouraged him, against the other gods' advice, and now he's protected by the sword I gave him against their revenge. It was a clever trick I played against myself, and Fricka understood it immediately. In doing so, she saw straight through me, and I must now do what she says.'

Brünnhilde was moved, and said, 'So Siegmund must lose?'

'I once held Alberich's 'Ring' in my hand,' said Wotan, 'and greedily grabbed the gold! The curse Alberich put on the Ring will not leave me just because I got rid of it. It condemns me to abandon and even to kill whoever I love, and to betray whoever trusts me.'

Wotan was like a man on the edge of an abyss.

'Good-bye, heavenly pomp and ceremony,' he cried suddenly. 'The splendour of the gods now bites the dust. There's only one thing left now – the end of everything. THE END!' He paused for a moment, then said, 'And Alberich will see to it! Now I understand Erda's mysterious words – "When Alberich, dark enemy of love, begets a son in anger, the end of the gods is not far away."'

'I only recently heard that Alberich had created a child with a woman, for gold, not for love, on which he pronounced his curse. So a magic seed from that loveless dwarf is growing in a woman's womb, whereas I, full of love, cannot father a free child! Curse Alberich! Curse him!'

Brünnhilde was upset by her father's desperate anger.

'Tell me father, what I can do?'

'Be a good girl. Fight for Fricka, for marriage and its vows,' said Wotan bitterly, and continued, 'I have to agree with her. My own will is now impotent. I – a god – cannot even will a free man into existence. You've now got to fight for the slaves of Fricka.'

'Oh, take back those words, father. You love Siegmund. For love of you alone – I can't help it – I'll protect him.'

'No, I'm ordering you to kill Siegmund and give victory to Hunding. But look out – be strong and summon up all your courage for battle. Siegmund wields a victorious sword and will not easily fall.'

Brünnhilde was shocked, but she was her father's daughter. 'Your confused words will never make me turn against him,' she said – 'the one you have always taught me to love, whose noble valour is so dear to your heart.'

'Shameless child,' Wotan burst out. 'How dare you speak like that to me? What are you but the blind choice of my will? In talking to you now, have I sunk so low as to be insulted by a creature of my own making? My child, do you know my anger? It is devastating, destructive, and will bring you nothing but grief. You must do as I say. Siegmund must bite the dust. It's your responsibility!'

Wotan stormed away and was soon deep in the mountains. Brünnhilde bent down sadly, picked up her weapons, and prepared for battle.

Chapter Four

The fatal day had dawned. Brünnhilde gazed down from the mountain-side into the valley and watched Siegmund and Sieglinde hurrying towards a mountain ridge. Sieglinde seemed to be rushing ahead, Siegmund trying to restrain her.

'Rest!' he said. 'Stop here!'

She insisted on going on, but he prevented her.

'Wait here, sweetest of women. We were so happy, but our consciences got the better of us. And I couldn't keep up with you. Can't you see I'm here to help you? Your brother, my bride!'

But Sieglinde was not to be comforted. The more she loved Siegmund, the more ashamed she felt to have been forced into a loveless marriage with Hunding. And the more she felt degraded, the more she felt she would degrade Siegmund.

'You are the purest of men,' she cried, 'so I must leave you. I'm an outcast, and can only bring shame on you and make you a criminal too.'

'Shame or no shame,' said Siegmund, 'I'm determined to kill Hunding. Notung will avenge you.'

Then Sieglinde was frightened by Hunding's horn. The fight started. She lost sight of Siegmund immediately. Soon it was all over. She had a vision of the fight, of Notung in pieces and even of the ash-tree itself crashing down.

'Brother, my brother,' she called, 'Oh, Siegmund . . .' and she heard him say 'Sister, my love!'

But both were helpless, lying on the ground. She was too weak and miserable to move and rested her head on his lap. All he could do was look at her and gently kiss her forehead.

Chapter Five

Brünnhilde now entered, leading her faithful horse, one hand resting on its neck, the other holding her Valkyrie shield and spear. And solemnly, as a Valkyrie, she spoke to Siegmund.

'Look at me, Siegmund. I am she who you will soon follow.'

Siegmund did look at her. 'Who are you,' he said, 'so beautiful and so solemn?'

'Only those about to die can see me. Anyone who does so departs this life. I only appear to heroes. To see me means you've been chosen by death.'

Siegmund swallowed. 'And where do you take these heroes who follow you?' he asked.

'To Valhalla. The Lord of the Slain has chosen you,' came the answer.

'Will I find my own father, Wälse, in Valhalla?'

'Yes, you will find your father there.'

'And will I be welcomed by a woman in Valhalla?'

'Wish-maidens will be there for you. Wotan's own daughter will hand you your drink.'

'You are wonderful,' said Siegmund, 'and of course I realize you are Wotan's child. Can you just tell me one thing? Will my sister-bride go with her brother? Will Siegmund embrace Sieglinde there?'

'No, Sieglinde will continue to breath the air of mortals for a while. You will not see her in Valhalla.'

'In that case, greet Valhalla from me, greet Wotan and all the heroes, and forget Wotan's bountiful daughters. I'm not going there.'

'The very fact that the Valkyrie looked at you means you must go.'

'Siegmund will remain where Sieglinde lives, happy or sad. Your look didn't give me the look of death. It will never force me to leave.'

'Of course that's true – as long as you're alive. But don't you see that death itself will force you?'

Siegmund only said, 'I'd like to see the hero who could defeat me.'

Brünnhilde's answer came in one word: 'Hunding.'

'You'll have to do better than that,' said Siegmund. 'I intend to slay him in battle. Do you not know this sword? He who left it for me meant me to win.'

'The same man says you must die and has taken his power from the sword.'

'Hush! Don't wake my sister,' said Siegmund. 'I'm the only person in the world who might save this poor creature, and if I cannot, I'm not going to Valhalla but to the other place – to Hell itself!'

'Do you set so little store by everlasting bliss,' said Brünnhilde. 'Is that sad creature everything to you?'

Siegmund looked up at her and said, bitterly, 'How young and glowing you look, but how cold and hard you are! Gloat if you will at my misery – enjoy it – just don't talk to me of Valhalla's empty joys.'

Brünnhilde was moved. 'I understand,' she said. 'Siegmund, I will protect your wife. Bring her my greetings.'

Siegmund grew angry. 'As long as I live,' he said, 'no one else shall touch her. And if I am fated to die, let me kill her first while she sleeps.'

At this, Brünnhilde flared up. 'Siegmund,' she said, 'put your wife in my hands, if only for the sake of your child she is carrying.'

Siegmund was not listening. He looked at Notung, his sword, held it over the pregnant Sieglinde and pledged to take two lives with it at a stroke. Even calm Brünnhilde became excited and raised her voice.

'Stop! Listen to me. I've made up my mind. Sieglinde will live, and you with her. I'm going to change the outcome of your fight with Hunding, and bring you first blessing, then victory.'

As Brünnhilde spoke these words, Hunding's horn sounded. She told Siegmund to get ready, and that his sword would be as steadfast as her own support for him. Then she left the scene with Grane, her faithful horse. Siegmund remained, exultant. Sieglinde lay on the stony ground.

Siegmund went to Sieglinde, bent over her and listened to her breathing. She was alive, though she did not look it, and he hoped she would sleep on till the fight was over and he had given Hunding what he deserved, thanks to Notung.

With that, Siegmund ran off, midst dark storm clouds and flashes of lightening. Sieglinde began to stir from her dreams. She had been dreaming that she was with her mother at home, in front of the fire which would destroy it, and she woke up crying 'Siegmund, Siegmund!' What she heard in reply was terrifying. It was Hunding's voice shouting, 'Woeful, Woeful! Stand clear and fight!' answered by Siegmund's voice asking how the two fighters could have missed each other.

Sieglinde shouted at both men, hoping to stop the fight, but they were deep in battle, and now Brünnhilde encouraged and tried to help Siegmund, while Wotan did the same for Hunding. Siegmund was about to bring Notung down on Hunding's head, when Wotan stepped in with his great spear and broke Notung into several pieces. Hunding then ran his spear through Siegmund who died immediately. Sieglinde screamed and fainted. Brünnhilde bent over her and lifted her onto her horse. Wotan watched what he had brought about with disgust. Seeing Hunding looking triumphant, he felled him dead to the ground with a contemptuous gesture: 'Go and grovel to Fricka!' As for Brünnhilde, 'How dare she go against my command?' he thought. 'I must go after her and punish her.'

Chapter Six

At the top of a craggy mountain, near the home of the gods, eight Valkyries returned from the battlefield. They were fully armed, but agile, free, and not weighed down by their armour. All were on horseback and some had dead warriors across their saddles, as they shouted exultantly to each other about the heroes they were carrying.

Suddenly one Valkyrie, Waltraute, shouted out that Brünnhilde was missing. Almost immediately, Sigrune, another, proclaimed that Brünnhilde was approaching, as always on her famous horse, Grane.

'But what's that across Grane's saddle,' asked Waltraute. 'It's not a hero, only a woman.'

Then Grane fell to the ground with exhaustion, and Brünnhilde lifted the woman up, and almost shouted for help.

'I've never run away before, but Wotan is coming after me,' said Brünnhilde.

This was too much for the Valkyries. All at once they asked, 'Have you lost your senses? You mean you're running away from Wotan?'

They had never seen their eldest sister in such alarm before. At first she couldn't get the words out, but then she said, speaking loudly, 'Listen. The woman I've collected from the battlefield is Sieglinde, Siegmund's sister and bride. Wotan is raging against those Wälsungs. I should have deprived Siegmund of victory today, but I protected him with my shield against Wotan's orders. So Wotan struck him with his spear, Siegmund fell, and I fled to you, bringing Sieglinde, hoping you might hide us away from our angry father.'

As she would have known in her right mind, her eight half-sisters refused one by one to go against their revered father. All the noise and the quarrelling awoke Sieglinde who quickly grasped what was happening. Brünnhilde comforted her, but she spoke her mind urgently – 'Please leave me to die. You shouldn't have saved me. I would have died with Siegmund. Now I'm far from him, and to be near him again you must kill me as he was killed – with a sword through my heart!'

Brünnhilde drew back and stood up, never letting her eyes from Sieglinde. 'Live,' she cried, 'for the sake of your love. Save the child you made together! You are carrying a Wälsung in your womb!'

An expression of ecstasy and joy came over Sieglinde and in the growing storm in the darkening sky, she shouted. 'Yes, save me, rescue my child! You Valkyries, give me protection!' All refused to help, so Sieglinde turned back to Brünnhilde, kneeling before her.

Brünnhilde raised her to her feet and spoke to her firmly. 'Go immediately and go on your own. I'll stay and face Wotan, and distract him while you escape his fury.'

'But where am I to go?' asked Sieglinde

'To the east of here,' said Sigrune, 'the forest extends to where Fafner has taken the Nibelung's treasure. There he changed into a dragon and guards Alberich's Ring in a cave. It's no place for a hapless woman.'

'And yet,' said Brünnhilde, 'for that reason Wotan hates that forest, so it would shield her from that angry god.'

'Beware,' warned Waltraute, 'Wotan's on the war-path.' And Brünnhilde heard the roar of the wind as he approached.

'Go then,' and she pointed at Sieglinde. 'Go to the east and, through thick and thin, whatever happens to you, remember you are carrying the world's noblest hero in your sheltering womb.'

Gathering up the fragments of Siegmund's sword and handing them to Sieglinde, she told her to keep them safely, and if ever a hero forged them into a sword again, he would be called Siegfried – 'peace in victory'.

Sieglinde looked on Brünnhilde with rapture. For a moment, all her misery seemed suspended and she wanted to bless Brünnhilde for what she had done. Then black thunderclouds broke and Sieglinde hurried away.

Far from feeling blessed, Brünnhilde didn't know where to put herself for fear, because she suddenly heard Wotan, and saw him storming angrily looking for her, hidden among the other Valkyries. When he began to accuse them – her sisters – of her sins and her failings, she had to speak up. 'I'm here, father. Order my punishment!'

'It's not me ordering your punishment, but you,' he said shortly, and she had never seen him so solemn. 'You only existed,' he continued, 'through my will, and you have willed against me. You only carried out my orders, and have given orders against me. You carried out my every wish, and now wish against me. You were my shield, and you raised your shield against me. You inspired heroes, and now inspire them against me. All this you once were. Now tell me yourself what you are now. You are certainly no longer my wish-maid. A Valkyrie you have been. From now on be only what you are!'

'Do you mean an outcast?' asked Brünnhilde.

'I mean I'll no longer send you out from Valhalla to look for heroes. I'll no longer have you beside me at feasts and gaze on your beauty. You will no longer belong with the gods. Yes, you're an outcast,' said Wotan.

'You mean you're taking away all that you gave me?'

'Your future master will take it away. I'm going to put you fast asleep without protection on this mountain. The first man who finds you and wakes you, you'll be his, condemned to sit by his hearth and spin, like a good wife.'

Hearing this, the other Valkyries screamed in horror and ran into the pine forest.

Chapter Seven

The other Valkyries moved away. Brünnhilde and Wotan were alone. The storms subsided. It was twilight, then night. Brünnhilde asked Wotan if she had really deserved such drastic punishment, such demotion and humiliation.

'Control your anger,' she pleaded, 'and explain to me clearly what hidden guilt there is that forces you to disown me.'

'Ask what you did,' said Wotan.

'I carried out your orders.'

'Did I order you to fight for the Wälsung?'

'You told me to act as Lord of the Slain and kill Hunding.'

'But I changed my mind.'

'When Fricka turned your own mind against you and you gave way to her, you became your own enemy,' said Brünnhilde.

Wotan began to look more sad than angry. 'I thought you had understood me and I punished your conscious defiance. But you thought me a coward and foolish.'

'I may not be very clever,' said Brünnhilde, 'but one thing I do know – that you loved the Wälsung. I knew the struggle with Fricka that made you forget this, and made you withdraw your protection from him.'

'Yes,' interrupted Wotan, 'you knew I had to do that, so why did you dare to protect him?'

'Because I loved him. And it was you whose will it was that I should encounter him, and thus breathed love into my heart.'

'Yes,' said Wotan, 'and you did what I wanted but could not do. I'm no longer free, but subject to laws of my own making. You must be free of me. Our whispering together in corners will be no more.'

'If I must leave you, you can't abandon me to just anyone, as prey to an arrogant husband, or to a vainglorious one who wants me for show. I'm part of you, half of yourself.'

'Don't mention that. You were happy to follow the power of love. Now follow the man it has led you to.'

'She who escaped your clutches has already preserved the Wälsungs,' proclaimed Brünnhilde. 'Sieglinde protects the holiest seed. In pain and grief she will one day give birth to what she now hides in her fear.'

'Don't expect me to protect that creature or the fruit of her womb!'

'She keeps safe the sword you made for Siegmund.'

'And smashed to smithereens. Don't try to unnerve me, my girl. Accept your fate. I can't choose it for you. I've got to move on far away – two can play at running away. I may not know what that fate is, but pass sentence I must.'

'What have you thought up for me to submit to? If you really want to imprison me in deepest sleep, easy prey to the lowest of the low, you must grant me what my sacred fear begs you. Protect me with frightful terrors, so that only the bravest, free-born hero will find me.'

Wotan balked at that. 'That's going too far,' he said.

'No, father, it's the one wish you must grant me,' said Brünnhilde. 'Kick away the child who clasps your knee, trample your own favourite, smash me to pieces, destroy me with your spear, but – you, cruellest of gods – don't give me the most miserable of fates. Instead, order a fire, its flames encircling this rock. Its tongue shall sear, its flames devour, any coward who dares approach this peaceful place.'

Wotan was overcome by his daughter's strength. With tears in his eyes, he looked into hers and spoke: 'Farewell, brave and glorious child. You are my heart's sacred pride. Farewell! If I must leave you, and no more lovingly greet you, if you may never again ride beside me, or serve mead at my table, if I must lose as I now love you, Oh, laughing delight of my eye! Let a bridal fire burn for you as never yet burned for a bride. Fiery flames shall engulf your rock. Let them frighten the faint-hearted with consuming terrors, so that such a coward would flee Brünnhilde's rock. Only one man shall woo this bride – one freer than myself, the god!'

Then Wotan took her head in his hands and kissed both her eyes, saying, 'And so I say goodbye and kiss your godhead away.' She sank back on a low mossy bank under a big fir-tree. Wotan closed her helmet and covered her whole body with her full-length shield.

Then he stood up to his own great height and pointed his spear at the rock. 'Loge,' he called in his deep bass voice, 'Loge, listen. I found you first as just a fiery glow, then you became a will-o'-the-wisp. Now I want you to be a roaring flame and to encircle this rock with fire.' And Wotan struck the ground three times with his spear. 'Loge, Loge, start now!'

A stream of fire seemed to spring from the rock itself and grew ever stronger, seeming to engulf Wotan, but the god was untouched. He stretched out his sword as if casting a spell, and cried. 'Anyone who fears the point of my Spear of Death shall never pass through this fire.' He gazed solemnly back at Brünnhilde, turned to leave, looked back again regretfully, then disappeared through the flames.

3. *Siegfried*

Characters

Siegfried, son of Siegmund and Sieglinde

Alberich, Lord of the Nibelungs

Mime, his brother

Wotan, Father of the Gods

Fafner, builder of Valhalla, changed into a dragon

Erda, Earth Mother

Brünnhilde, daughter of Wotan and Erda

Woodbird

Chapter One

Deep in the forest stood a forge, or smithy, for making farm tools and horseshoes. It had a large anvil in the middle, beside which an ugly dwarf squatted, his head in his hands.

It was Alberich's brother Mime, cursing his luck and fruitless labour in forging a sword good enough for giant hands, which had been bent and broken in two by the wretched boy he had made it for, as if it were nothing but a toy.

Mime threw the ruined sword aside and raised his head in thought.

'I know a sword he couldn't ruin – the remains of Notung, if only I could weld it together.'

Mime knew that Fafner, the mighty dragon, was not far away in the same forest, hoarding the gold and the Ring which once belonged to his brother Alberich, and which gave its possessor the power to rule the world.

That was why, yet again, Mime worked the bellows to strengthen the fire, to try and forge the fragments into a sword once more, because he knew that sword was all-conquering Notung. His brother had told him about it.

Inspired by his greed, Mime was eventually successful. He drew the sword out of the heart of the fire, hammered it with all his puny might on the anvil, and brandished it aloft with a triumphant flourish.

At that moment, he was surprised by a large brown bear – not very surprised, because it was a trick young Siegfried often played, saying it was the only creature that answered his own lonely call for a friend. The bear distracted Mime, but he kept his head – which he wouldn't for long – and handed the sword to Siegfried.

He knew that only Siegfried had the strength to kill Fafner and win the gold. Then he himself would kill Siegfried, take the gold, and with it the all-powerful 'Ring'. Why else had he – Mime – rescued Siegfried and nurtured him as best he could? He was so longing to get the better of his bully of a brother who had treated him so cruelly in Nibelheim.

As soon as Siegfried took the sword in his hand, he felt its fragility and dashed it to pieces. Mime was horrified and once again reminded Siegfried that he had been father and mother to him as child and boy.

Mime had often said this, but just from looking at the animals in pairs in the forest and seeing the reflection of his own face in the stream, Siegfried knew it was not true. Mime had to admit this, and told him how he'd found Siegfried's mother in the forest, taken her into his cave, and helped her give birth.

'She died,' said Mime, 'but Siegfried flourished.'

'So my mother died because of me?' asked Siegfried. Mime did not answer, but explained how Sieglinde (his mother's name) entrusted the son she called Siegfried to him, and gave him as payment the fragments of a sword.

Straightaway, Siegfried asked Mime to forge the fragments into a sword once more.

'Why in such a hurry?' asked Mime.

'So I can get away from you,' said Siegfried – 'go out in the world and feel more at home.'

Once again, Mime tried to be a good smith, and once again he failed dismally, and crouched by the anvil, his head in his hands, once more in despair, for now he knew that all his Nibelung expertise was to no avail.

Wotan, the chief of the gods, who wanted the gold and the Ring as much as Mime, now chose to come to the smithy to unnerve Mime with a game of riddles – three each.

It was Mime's turn first, and he asked Wotan easy questions so as to be rid of him as soon as possible. Wotan's first two questions were also quite easy, and Mime answered correctly. However, Wotan's third and last question hit Mime on a nerve and nearly drove him to distraction.

'Who,' asked Wotan, 'Oh, crafty smith, can forge the sword Notung from its fragments?'

Mime stuttered and stumbled over an answer, which Wotan supplied.

'Only one who does not know the feeling of fear,' he said, 'can forge Notung anew.'

And Wotan laughingly added as he departed: 'One, what's more, to whom your head is forfeit,' leaving Mime prone to a vision of extreme terror.

At that very moment, the young Siegfried came crashing through the undergrowth and gave Mime the fright of his life.

'Have you finished forging the sword?' Siegfried asked. And Mime only muttered under his breath about one who doesn't know fear, and how it wouldn't therefore be him.

Siegfried hardly heard what Mime said, but he set about forging Notung himself. If it had been his father's once, it would be his now. Siegfried took command of the forge, set the bellows blowing and the furnace blazing. After hard hammering on the

anvil, which made the fearful, whimpering Mime close his eyes and ears, there was a loud hissing as Siegfried plunged the finished sword into the water-trough, which immediately bubbled and boiled over.

Notung was finished and its blade flashed as Siegfried held it up in triumph, and then brought it crashing down, splitting the anvil in two. Mime didn't know where to put himself for fear, but also for joy. Revenge on his brother was near. He just had to lead the boisterous Siegfried to Fafner, where lay the gold and the Ring.

Chapter Two

In the middle of the night, the two ultimate rivals for the Ring came upon each other spying out the land around Fafner's cave deep in the forest. Alberich and Wotan argued bitterly about who would inherit the Ring.

Wotan warned Alberich that his brother, Mime, was bringing danger in the form of an innocent boy who knew nothing of the Ring, but who would kill the dragon. Knowing Wotan's superior powers, Alberich asked if he would take part in the fight for the treasure.

'No,' said Wotan. 'If I love someone I let them look after themselves. They stand or fall on their own. I just need heroes.'

Wotan even woke Fafner so that Alberich might warn him of the approaching danger and the loss of the gold. Angry to be woken, the dragon only muttered, 'I have what I hold', and went back to sleep.

Meanwhile, as Siegfried followed Mime through the forest, he was excited by two thoughts. Mime had told him that he was at last going to learn what fear was, and – even better – he had the feeling that, whatever happened, he was at last going to be free of Mime.

Mime couldn't help trying his best to frighten Siegfried with the horrors that awaited him in Fafner's cave, which would end in Siegfried being eaten alive by the fearsome dragon.

Siegfried – he who knew no fear – couldn't wait for the fight. He just needed to know one more thing from Mime. 'Is the dragon's heart in the usual place?' 'Yes, of course,' replied Mime. 'Just like a human's. Are you feeling frightened yet?'

Siegfried had no idea what he meant, and answered: 'I'm going to thrust Notung into the dragon's heart, and if that's not fear, be off with you. You're wasting your time – and mine!'

And with that, Siegfried – Notung aloft – frightened Mime away.

How peaceful and still it was without the eternally hectoring dwarf. Siegfried sat down under a lime tree and gave himself up to his thoughts.

What can his real father have looked like? If his father had been Mime, he himself would have looked ugly like him. But he had seen his own reflection in the stream, and it looked nothing like Mime. How glad he was that Mime was not his father!

But his mother! What did his mother look like? His own mother – a human woman!

Could he ever know? She bore me in pain, he thought, but why did she die of me? Do all human mothers die of their sons? How sad that would be!

Then Siegfried sighed, stretched out on the ground, and listened to the deep silence. Almost asleep, he was woken by bird-song more beautiful than any he had ever heard before in the forest. One particularly happy song amongst many seemed to be speaking directly to him. He was sure it was for him and longed to answer. He had never learned to whistle, so he cut a reed pipe with his sword, but blew in vain. Only an ugly sound came, and the bird went on singing.

So desperate was Siegfried to answer that he took out the horn he always carried for hunting wolves and bears, threw away the pipe, and blew a merry tune.

At that moment, a gigantic dragon with the head of a giant turtle rose up from the cave behind him and gave a loud roar.

'Good,' said Siegfried. 'It looks as though my tune has brought me real company.'

Then a strange conversation took place.

'Who's there?' asked Fafner, because that was who it was – the giant Fafner, who had killed his brother for the gold and the Ring, and turned himself into a dragon using the Hiding-helmet.

'Oh,' said Siegfried. 'An animal that can talk! Maybe I can learn something from you. I've never learnt what fear is. Can you teach me?'

'Are you brave, boy?' asked Fafner.

'Brave, even maybe rash – how should I know? But if you don't teach me fear, you'll soon know it.'

'I came out to drink. Now I can eat, too,' said Fafner, licking his lips.

Siegfried stepped nearer and drew his sword. 'What fine teeth, and what strong jaws,' he said. And as he added, 'But I don't want to be your breakfast', he plunged Notung into Fafner's heart.

Because there was so much of him, Fafner did not die immediately, but asked who the boy was who struck the fatal blow.

'Who are you, bold boy,' asked Fafner in a softer voice. 'Who made a murderer out of a child? You couldn't have thought of it yourself.'

'There's so much I don't know,' replied Siegfried, 'not even yet who I am.'

'Oh, bright-eyed boy, unaware who you are,' continued Fafner. 'You've killed Fafner, the last of the giants, who guarded the treasure. Be careful, fair boy. The treasure is surrounded by danger. The gold is cursed. He who urged you to kill me is plotting your death.'

'Oh, tell me about myself,' replied Siegfried. 'My name is Siegfried.'

At that moment Fafner repeated the name, sighed, lifted himself up, and died. Siegfried pulled his sword from the dragon's breast. Blood spurted from the wound, and he licked it from his hand.

At that moment the Woodbird sang again, and Siegfried could understand every word of its song. It sang triumphantly of Siegfried now possessing the Nibelung's treasure – how the Hiding-helmet could lead to great deeds, and how the Ring would make him ruler of the world.

'Thank you, dear Woodbird, for that. I'll gladly follow your song.'

Tasting the blood of his victory enabled Siegfried not only to understand birdsong, but also Mime's evil thoughts.

He put the Ring on his finger and tied the Hiding-helmet to his belt. But no sooner was he on his way than who should he meet but a very agitated Mime, who told him the Nibelung gold belonged to him and that he, Mime, would kill Siegfried if he didn't hand it over. 'Yes,' he said, 'I'll give you poison and cut off your head.'

For Siegfried this was too much, coming from the creature who had already made his childhood a misery, and now told him that he had hated him from the very beginning. It was time to use Notung again, so just as Mime was screaming further threats of poison and beheading, the great sword did its work, and Siegfried threw Mime's body into Fafner's cave where the remains of the treasure lay.

Siegfried felt happy but tired. So much had happened. He needed the Woodbird's guidance again. The effect of tasting the dragon's blood would last forever. And now the Woodbird sang another tune. It sang to him of love and about the most beautiful woman asleep at the top of a high mountain surrounded by flames of fire. Her name was Brünnhilde, and if Siegfried could go through that fierce furnace, she would be his – provided he did not know fear.

'Does not know fear!' exclaimed Siegfried. 'But that's me. The simple boy who doesn't know fear! Just show me the way, dear bird, and I will follow after.'

Chapter Three

On his way to the fiery mountain, Siegfried's way was barred by Wotan, who asked him where he was going.

'You can say that again,' answered Siegfried. 'Can't you show me? I'm looking for a mountain surrounded by fire. There's a woman asleep there I want to awaken.'

Siegfried did not know that Wotan was the god of gods, let alone that he was his own grandfather. He only saw him as just one more grown-up in his way. However, when Wotan explained that Notung once before shattered on his spear and would do so again, Siegfried realized who the old man confronting him was.

'My father's enemy!' he cried. 'Just what I want! Vengeance!' And with one stroke Notung shattered Wotan's great spear, thus clearing Siegfried's path to the mountain.

Chapter Four

As he approached the flames surrounding it, Siegfried blew his favourite hunting-call on his horn. The flames died down and seemed to change into a cooling mist, reddening by the rising sun of the dawn. As he walked through the mist, the clouds cleared, revealing the bright blue sky of the morning.

At the top of the mountain, in the bright sunshine, the first thing he saw was a fine horse sleeping, but then – a little apart – he saw the body of a warrior reclining on a mossy bank, with helmet and body shield.

A man in arms, he thought. But instead of being on his guard, Siegfried found himself full of curiosity and admiration. The warrior was deeply asleep. Siegfried carefully lifted, first, the shield, then the protecting helmet. Blonde and beautiful curls of hair dropped from the warrior's head. Siegfried's heart pounded. Next he tried to lift the warrior's breastplate. He couldn't undo the buckles, so he used Notung to cut through them.

'But that's not a man!' he exclaimed in the greatest excitement. He felt dizzy, had no idea what to do, and repeatedly called for his mother. He was completely dazzled by the figure of the warrior. For the first time in his life, he saw a woman, and for the first time in his life felt fear. Now at last he knew what it was. A woman lying asleep had taught him fear.

After he had awoken her with a kiss, Siegfried thought love and ecstasy would follow. But Brünnhilde first wanted to know who he was.

'Who is the hero who awoke me?' she asked.

'I'm Siegfried who went through the fire for you and loosened your armour.'

'Oh, bless the mother who bore you,' exclaimed Brünnhilde. 'If only you knew how I have always loved you. I cherished you before you were born or even conceived. So long have I loved you.'

'So my mother didn't die – she was just asleep,' concluded Siegfried.

Brünnhilde explained that his mother was dead and would never return, but that she herself loved him and had defied her father, Wotan, so that he, Siegfried, would find her. This made him feel free to embrace and kiss her, but she dwelt on the memory of being a Valkyrie. She looked fondly at her horse, Grane, and resented Siegfried's taking off her shield, breast-plate and helmet to uncover her womanhood.

Siegfried told her how he had come through the fire and how those same flames that surrounded the mountain were now burning for her in his breast. Then Brünnhilde began to feel dizzy and soon yielded to Siegfried's offer of laughter and love.

When he proclaimed her his bride, her hesitation was gradually transformed into joyous love. An ardent exchange of passionate words followed, until they both fell ecstatically into each other's arms.

4. *Twilight of the Gods*

Characters

Siegfried

Brünnhilde

Gutrune, a Gibichung, daughter of Gibich and Grimhilde

Gunther, a Gibichung, her brother (ruler of the Gibichung)

Hagen, son of Alberich and Grimhilde, younger half-brother of Gutrune and Gunther

Alberich, a Nibelung, father of Hagen

Waltraute, a Valkyrie

Three Norns

Three Rhinemaidens

Prelude

On the rock where Brünnhilde was once put to sleep, three spectral, ghostly female figures sit talking. They are the Norns, who know the past and the future.

The First Norn talked of far-off times when Wotan forfeited an eye through drinking from the sacred spring, and broke a branch off the World Ash-Tree to forge his spear, leaving a scar that wilted the tree, which withered and died.

The Second Norn told how Wotan carved Sacred Contracts into his spear and ruled the world with it, until a hero broke it in two with his sword, so abolishing the Sacred Laws. Then Wotan ordered the destruction of the World Ash-Tree and the breaking of its branches.

The Third Norn told of the giants' building of Valhalla, where Wotan rules, surrounded by the broken branches of the World-Ash-Tree. When all that is engulfed in a mighty conflagration, it would signal the end – the twilight – of the gods.

Then the Norns talked on about the present and the future. However, as night faded, the senses of these night creatures faded with it. Their wisdom was at an end. They had to descend, back to their mother – down to Erda, source of all wisdom.

Chapter One

Siegfried and Brünnhilde had been happy together. Her initial fears about giving herself to him – who had taken her, if not by force, by surprise – disappeared and left her free to enjoy her new husband. He was equally happy with her, and both exulted over their marriage and the exciting circumstances of their first meeting, when he fought his way through a raging fire to reach her – a fire which now seemed to rage with love for him in her breast. Now it was time for Siegfried to go out into the world. He had heard of the Gibichung, with whom he must fight or go in peace. He said goodbye to Brünnhilde and reassured her that the flames he had penetrated would continue to protect her. Then he took off the Ring, which he had worn ever since he had taken it and the Hiding-helmet from Fafner's cave after he had killed him.

'In return for all you have given and taught me,' said Siegfried, 'I give you this Ring. It carries all my power. A dragon once guarded it with its life. May you now be like that dragon and preserve my love.'

'That I swear,' replied Brünnhilde. 'And in exchange I will give you Grane, my own horse. He can no longer take to the clouds as he used to, but he'll take you wherever you want to go – and through fire as well.'

Leaving each other for the first time after meeting and after loving so much, Siegfried and Brünnhilde said long and passionate farewells. Even apart, thought Brünnhilde, we are together. We cannot be divided!

Chapter Two

The Hall of the Gibichung on one bank of the Rhine, sloping down to the river. On the other bank are craggy mountains. The Gibichung twins, Gunther and Gutrune, are sitting on their double throne at a table. Their half-brother Hagen is sitting at the table beneath them.

Gunther is unsure of himself, and although Hagen is his younger half-brother and not even a true Gibichung but a Nibelung, he asks him for reassurance that he, Gunther, is a Gibichung.

Hagen could not help showing his jealousy of Gunther, but said that their mother, Grimhilde herself, had taught him to respect Gunther as a true Gibichung – whereupon Gunther told Hagen not to be jealous, pointing out that he may be the elder, but that Hagen was the wiser.

'I'm not that wise,' replied Hagen. 'You two real Gibichung may rule. But you, Gunther, have no wife, and Gutrune no husband. And I know a miracle that can put that right.'

This silenced the brother and sister. What could their half-brother possibly mean? 'What woman can you mean?' asked Gunther.

'I know of one,' said Hagen. 'She is the most beautiful woman in the world and lives high on a rocky cliff, surrounded by fire. Only a hero who can pass through that fire can win Brünnhilde.'

Gunther doubted he had the courage, and said so. Hagen only too readily agreed, and said it needed a stronger man. Gunther asked who that could be.

'Siegfried, the Wälsung,' answered Hagen. 'He is the greatest hero, son of the twins, Siegmund and Sieglinde, overpowered by love. Siegfried was bought up to great deeds in the wild forest. He would be right for Gutrune.'

Gutrune asked what great deeds Siegfried had performed that he should be called such a great hero.

'The Nibelung Alberich's gold,' explained Hagen, 'was once guarded by Fafner, who turned himself into a dragon with the Hiding-helmet. Siegfried shut Fafner's snapping jaws and killed him with his victorious sword. That's why he's a hero.'

'Yes,' said Gunther. 'I've heard of the power of the Nibelung gold, and that Siegfried had won it, and that Brünnhilde must therefore fall to him. So why raise my hopes of obtaining her when I do not have such power?'

Hagen seemed to look into the distance and said, 'Supposing Siegfried brought Brünnhilde home to you! Wouldn't she then be yours?'

'How,' asked Gunther, 'could I make this good man woo his own bride for me?'

'He'd do so soon enough,' said Hagen, 'if he wanted Gutrune.'

Gutrune overheard this and said, 'You're a tease Hagen. How can I possibly win Siegfried? If he's the world's greatest hero, its most beautiful women have long since enjoyed his love.'

Hagen quite expected Gutrune to say that. She always did have a low opinion of herself.

'Have you forgotten,' he said, 'the magic potion in the secret cupboard? It will do the trick. If Siegfried drinks the magic drink, he will completely forget he'd ever seen a woman before you. His memory will be wiped out. How do you like my plan?'

Straightway Gunther exclaimed, 'Praise be to Grimhilde who bore us such a brother!'

Gutrune only sighed, 'Siegfried – if only I could set eyes on him!'

Hagen was pleased. He knew Siegfried was on his way down the Rhine, seeking the lord of the Gibichung. Soon he saw his boat, heard his horn, and saw him nearing the river-bank with powerful oar-strokes. Gunther was beside Hagen, who shouted towards Siegfried, 'Where are you bound?'

The expected answer came, 'To Gibich's strong sons.'

Chapter Three

Siegfried duly came ashore, welcomed by Hagen, and asked immediately which was Gibich's son.

'I am,' said Gunther, and Siegfried replied, as must all such visitors, 'Good! Now fight with me, or be my friend.'

Gunther smiled. 'Forget the fighting,' he said, 'be my guest!'

The two introduced each other. Gunther explained that he was heir to armies and land, which would be at Siegfried's disposal. Siegfried explained in turn that his heritage was only his own body, wearing out as he lived – and a sword he had forged himself and with which he could swear fealty.

Hagen interrupted and asked about the Nibelung gold.

'Oh, yes,' said Siegfried. 'I almost forgot it. I left it in the cave where a dragon watched over it.'

'And didn't you take anything from it?' asked Hagen again.

'This object. I don't know what it's for.'

Hagen knew. 'It's the Hiding-helmet,' he explained. 'It can transform you into anything you want and take you wherever you want to go.'

'Did you take anything else from the cave?' asked Hagen again.

'A Ring,' said Siegfried.

'And where is it now?' asked Hagen.

'In the safe keeping of the most wonderful woman.'

Hagen murmured, almost under his breath, 'Brünnhilde', while Gunther was telling Siegfried that he had nothing to offer him in exchange for such treasure, and that he could only offer him his true fealty as a friend.

At that moment, Hagen held Gutrune's door open while she came out. She looked at Siegfried and said, 'Welcome, guest, in Gibich's house. Allow its daughter to give you to drink.'

Siegfried did not drink immediately. He bowed to Gutrune, held up the drink and said quietly: 'If I ever forgot, Brünnhilde, all that you gave me, I'll never forget this – my first drink to our true love. I drink it to you.'

Siegfried took a long draught of the drink. Gutrune, embarrassed, looked away, while Siegfried looked at her with sudden passion. He felt his heart burning and his blood seemed to bubble in his veins. He turned to Gutrune and offered her the fealty he had offered her brother, Gunther. However Gutrune, still feeling unworthy, left the Gibichung Hall.

Siegfried was consumed with passion for her. It had virtually expelled all his memory of Brünnhilde.

'Gunther,' he asked suddenly, 'have you a wife?'

Gunther said that he hadn't a wife, and the one he desired he could not win.

'What wife could you not obtain if I were to help you?' said Siegfried.

As Gunther described the woman he desired, on a rocky cliff, surrounded by fire, Siegfried seemed to sense something familiar, but he couldn't keep hold of it, and the feeling of déjà-vu passed.

When Gunther said that he could never reach that rocky cliff, because he would be frightened of the fire, Siegfried thought of Gutrune and said, 'I don't fear the flames. I shall win your bride. My strength will be your strength, as long as I win Gutrune as wife.'

Gunther wasn't clear how Siegfried could woo his own wife, so Siegfried explained the power of the Hiding-helmet. He also explained that Gunther would have to wait one night, before he, Siegfried, could win Brünnhilde and bring her home as Gunther's wife.

To this plan, the two drank blood-brotherhood. Hagen refused to join in. He said his blood was impure. As the two blood-brothers prepared to leave, Hagen stood leaning against a doorpost. For most people, he thought, Siegfried bringing his bride Brünnhilde to the land of the Gibichung might be unexpected and strange, but the important thing is that she will bring the Ring with her – for me! Not for nothing was he – Hagen – the son of Alberich, the Nibelung.

Chapter Four

On her rocky cliff Brünnhilde was sitting alone, happily contemplating Siegfried's Ring on her finger, turning over all her memories of him, momentarily distracted by the sound of thunder, then turning back to the Ring again.

Soon there was more thunder, the sound of a Valkyrie horse flying through the clouds, and the familiar voice of her Valkyrie sister, Waltraute. She seemed to come urgently. Why else but to share Brünnhilde's happiness, which Brünnhilde wasted no time in telling? But then she saw that Waltraute was in a state of fear and anguish, and she listened to her attentively and with mounting apprehension.

Waltraute told how, ever since Brünnhilde's departure, Wotan had declined. One day he had returned from his wanderings through the world with his spear shattered by a hero. He ordered The World Ash-Tree to be cut down, its branches broken and piled in a heap around Valhalla. The Valkyries gathered round him, but he sat, and still sits, in total silence, the shattered spear gripped in his hand.

Then Waltraute told how she herself sobbed on Wotan's breast. His expression softened, and he remembered Brünnhilde, whereupon he closed his eyes and, as if deep in a dream, whispered these words: 'If you, Brünnhilde, return the Ring to the Rhinemaidens, the gods and the whole world will be redeemed from the weight of its curse.'

That's when Waltraute took thought, stole out of the gathering, mounted her horse and rode through storms to Brünnhilde. 'Now, I implore you dear Sister', she said, 'take courage and put an end to the endless misery of the eternal gods.'

Brünnhilde was amazed that anyone should want to take the Ring from her – the Ring given her by Siegfried, the very token of his love. She would never part from it, let alone give it back to the Rhinemaidens.

Waltraute facing defeat, swung into the saddle, and her Valkyrie horse galloped into a thundery sky. 'Woe to my sister,' she called, 'woe to the gods of Valhalla!'

Brünnhilde steadied herself in the abating storm. Evening fell and she could see the flames around her rock still burning, growing brighter against the increasing darkness.

Suddenly she heard Siegfried's horn below. He was coming back! He was coming back!

'Here I am,' she cried. 'My god, into my arms.'

Then immediately a scream, a cry: 'Treachery – who's broken through?'

Siegfried had come in the shape of Gunther, using the Hiding-helmet. In a voice like Gunther's, he said that he had come to woo her as his wife and that she now belonged to him. Brünnhilde seemed powerless, but now understood the full force of Wotan's punishment.

The Creature (Siegfried disguised as Gunther), who threatened her, said that night was falling and that she would have to marry him in her own chamber. This was too much. She bared her hand, brandished the Ring before him, and said that she could not be brought to shame as long as the Ring was her protector.

'Let it give Gunther a husband's rights,' said the Creature. 'The Ring makes you his wife.'

'The Ring makes me stronger than steel,' exclaimed Brünnhilde. 'Beware! No one can take it from me!'

A violent struggle followed, only ending when the Creature tore the Ring from Brünnhilde's finger. She screamed and nearly fainted.

'Now you are mine,' said the Creature. 'Now you are Brünnhilde, Gunther's bride. Show me to your chamber.'

'Oh miserable woman,' she cried. 'What can I do?'

'Now,' said Siegfried, drawing his sword and speaking in his own voice, 'bear witness that I wooed in honour, remained true to my blood-brother, and kept apart from his wife with this sword.'

Chapter Five

Siegfried returned to the Gibichung palace along the Rhine, once more in his own form and with only one thing in mind. No sooner had he asked Hagen if Gutrune was awake than she walked into the hall. At first, she worried about Siegfried's part in wooing Brünnhilde for Gunther, but then she relaxed, called him her naughty hero, and took his hand.

Hagen called his Gibichung soldiers together. At first they thought it was for a fight, but then Hagen announced it was for a party to welcome their chief, Gunther and his new wife, Brünnhilde. Hagen explained that she was a very special woman and that Gunther had only won her with the help of Siegfried the hero.

For the first time in his life Gunther felt a proper man, chief of his clan. His wife was at his side, and his beloved sister was marrying his blood-brother. It would be a double wedding. What could go wrong amidst the cascading festive music?

Then Brünnhilde began to tremble. She knew something was wrong. They thought she was ill, but she saw the Ring on Siegfried's finger and knew that it was Gunther who had wrestled it from her. Brünnhilde asked Siegfried how he had obtained it.

'Not from him,' answered Siegfried.

'If,' said Brünnhilde to Gunther, 'you took the Ring with which I married you from Siegfried, seek your rights and demand back my marriage pledge.'

'I never gave him the Ring,' said Gunther. 'Are you sure it's the same?'

'Where have you hidden the Ring you took from me?' Brünnhilde asked Gunther.

And then she suddenly realized it must have been Siegfried who forced the Ring from her.

'The Ring came to me from no woman,' said Siegfried. 'Nor did I take it from one. I won it in Fafner's cave, when I slew the mighty dragon. It's exactly the one.'

At this point, Hagen stood up between them. 'Brünnhilde,' he said, 'are you sure about the Ring. If it's the one you gave Gunther, it is his and Siegfried got it through deceit – deceit for which he must pay!'

'Yes,' said Brünnhilde, suddenly standing up – 'Deceit! Most shameful deceit! O ye gods. Was this your devious plan? Must I suffer like no one before? If so, then teach me endless revenge, burn me through with anger and break my heart to destroy him who betrayed me.'

Gunther was upset to see his new wife so angry. He began to speak but was cruelly interrupted.

'Keep out of this, traitor,' exclaimed Brünnhilde. 'You've been betrayed yourself.'

Then she turned to the crowd and cried: 'Let it be known to you all – I'm not married to Gunther but to that man there!'

'To Siegfried?' whispered the crowd. 'Gutrune's husband?'

'Yes. He made me desire and love him,' said Brünnhilde.

Siegfried reminded them all of his blood-brotherhood with Gunther, and how the edge of Notung's blade had lain between himself and Brünnhilde when he wooed her

for him. Brünnhilde called him a 'cunning hero', and said she not only knew very well Notung's sharp blade, but also when that sword was hanging in its sheath and its owner was winning her as his lover.

There was general consternation about whether Siegfried had betrayed his blood-brother, and Siegfried wondered if the Hiding-helmet had not properly transformed him when he had lain with Brünnhilde. Hagen offered to resolve the situation by having the parties swear to speak the truth on the tip of his spear.

Siegfried swore that he had been everlastingly loyal to Gunther. Brünnhilde swore he was lying. Nothing was resolved, but Siegfried, whose longing for Gutrune was still to be satisfied, remained buoyant, and rejoiced at his wedding. Gunther withdrew into depression, and Brünnhilde bitterly watched the happy Siegfried take Gutrune on his arm to the ceremony.

Brünnhilde wondered how all this could have happened, how her own special powers as the daughter of the father of the gods could allow it – how her Siegfried now held Gutrune. Hagen said he would take revenge.

'On whom?' asked Brünnhilde.

'On Siegfried, who betrayed you.'

She told him that, even if Siegfried were disguised by the Hiding-helmet, one of his eyes alone would make Hagen quake.

'But his false oath,' said Hagen, 'condemns him to my spear.'

'True oath, false oath! Same difference,' replied Brünnhilde.

'So no weapon can harm him?' asked Hagen.

'Not in battle,' said Brünnhilde. 'But he never turns his back on his enemy, so I didn't protect him there.'

'That's where I'll strike him,' cried Hagen triumphantly, turning to the miserable Gunther, to tell him that Siegfried's death alone could bring Brünnhilde back to him – and that she agreed that his death alone would atone both for Siegfried himself and for Gunther.

'Yes,' added Hagen, 'and you will be able to win back the Ring he stole from you.'

'You mean Brünnhilde's Ring,' said Gunther.

'No! I mean the Nibelung's Ring,' replied Hagen – 'The Ring of the Nibelung.'

There followed a double wedding amid jubilant music and singing. When Brünnhilde tries to withdraw, Hagen forces her back to Gunther who takes her hand.

Chapter Six

In a wooded and rocky valley, where the Rhine flowed past a steep cliff, the three Rhinemaidens were swimming wistfully. They sang of the olden days when the Rhinegold was there, and wished it were back again – free spirit of the deep. Suddenly a horn was heard. The Rhinemaidens knew it was Siegfried, the hero who could bring back their gold. He had lost his way. They talked to him and soon noticed the golden Ring on his finger.

‘Give that to us,’ they command, but he explained that he’d killed a huge dragon for it and would never part from it, despite their teasing. Then he thought further and wanted to please them.

‘Hey, Water-nixies,’ he shouted. ‘Come quickly. I’ll give you the Ring.’ He took it off his finger and held it out to them, suddenly glad to be rid of it.

However, he was surprised to hear all three tell him they would not take it until he had understood its evil. Then he would be glad when they freed him of the Ring’s curse. They told him that it had been smelted from the Rhinegold by Alberich who had shamefully lost it, but not before putting a curse of death on it.

‘Just as you killed the dragon,’ said the Rhinemaidens, ‘so you too will die, if you don’t give it to us straightaway. Only the waters of the Rhine can take away its curse.’

Siegfried had heard enough – or too much – from the Rhinemaidens. How could such nixies know everything? He could no longer believe them. Yes, their bodies were desirable and he’d have given anything, including the Ring, to enjoy them, but now their repeated threats only made him feel angry.

The Rhinemaidens left Siegfried saying that after his death a proud woman would that very day inherit from his own mean self, and deal more fairly with them. Then they swam away, happily singing, ‘To her, to her’, watched by a pensive Siegfried.

I’ve learnt about women in water and on land, he thought. If you don’t fall for their flattery, they frighten you with threats. Then if you have the nerve to resist them, you’ll feel the edge of their tongues. However, if I weren’t true to Guttrune, I’d gladly have tamed one of those tasty morsels.

Chapter Seven

Evening was falling. Siegfried was in a deep reverie, when he was interrupted by the unmistakable call of Hagen’s loud horn.

‘At last we’ve found you,’ said Hagen to Siegfried. And to his hunting party, including Gunther, he declared: ‘We’ll eat here, and Siegfried will show us his booty.’

‘I set out in search of game,’ said Siegfried, settling between Gunther and Hagen, ‘but found only waterfowl, and one of those wise birds said I would be killed this very day.’

'That would be bad hunting,' joked Hagen, 'if an empty-handed hunter were brought down by his own quarry!'

Siegfried said he was thirsty and was offered full drinking-horns.

'Siegfried,' said Hagen, 'I've heard it said that you are well versed in birdsong. Can that be true?'

'Oh, it's long since I listened to warbling birds,' replied Siegfried.

'Hey, cheer up, Gunther,' said Siegfried, giving him a drinking-horn. 'Drink with your blood-brother!'

'The brew tastes sour. I'm not in the mood.'

'Is Brünnhilde giving him trouble?' wondered Siegfried.

'If only he understood her as well as you do birds,' Hagen joked again.

'I've completely forgotten birds since I heard women singing,' replied Siegfried.

'But you did understand them once?' asked Hagen.

'Hey, Gunther, you poor fellow,' said Siegfried, 'if you want, I'll sing you songs from my younger days.'

'I'd like that,' replied Gunther. And Siegfried sang of Mime, his own forging of Notung, and the slaying of the dragon. He told of the miracle of the dragon's blood, how after tasting it he understood birdsong, and found both the Hiding-helmet and the Ring, which would make him ruler of the world. He went on to tell how the birdsong had warned him of Mime, who tried to poison him with a drink, but whom he laid out flat with Notung.

Hagen, still in hearty mood, laughed and said, 'So Mime at last got a taste of the sword he couldn't forge!'

'What else did the birdsong tell you?' asked the men, and Hagen offered Siegfried a drink, saying it would help him remember his past.

Siegfried drank and continued. 'The birdsong told me that after killing Mime I would find the most beautiful woman. She would be asleep on the highest rock. A fire would be burning around her, and if I went through the flames and awoke her, she – Brünnhilde – would be my bride.'

'And did you take birdie's advice?' asked Hagen.

'Yes, without hesitating,' said Siegfried excitedly, 'I went up there, climbed the fiery rock, went through the flames and found my prize – a glorious woman sleeping in bright shining armour. I loosed the helmet of the beautiful girl. With a bold kiss I awoke her. Oh, how ardently the lovely Brünnhilde's arm embraced me . . .'

'What's that I hear?' cried the horrified Gunther.

At that moment, two ravens flew out of a bush, over Siegfried, and disappeared.

'Do you know what that means?' asked Hagen. 'To me it means revenge!'

Siegfried had stood up, and watched the flight of the ravens, his back to Hagen.

At that moment Hagen thrust his spear into Siegfried's back.

Gunther tried to intervene – too late. Siegfried tried to lift his shield above him with both arms to crush Hagen. His strength failed him. His shield fell to the ground, and he fell, crashing on top of it. Gunther, Siegfried's blood-brother despite everything, bent over him in deepest sympathy.

Twilight had deepened since the presence of the ravens.

'Brünnhilde, my holy bride,' pleaded the dying Siegfried, 'Awaken. Open your eyes. Who put you to sleep again? Who put you so fast sleep? Now your awakener has come. He kisses you awake and again unbuckles your armour. Brünnhilde's desire awakes. Oh, those eyes, now open for ever! Oh, the bliss of her breath! Sweetest dying, sacred suffering! Brünnhilde bids me welcome!'

Siegfried dies. His body is carried away on his shield, followed by Gunther. Night has fallen and the moon breaks through the clouds and illuminates the funeral procession and the solemn music.

Chapter Eight

The Gibichung Hall on the banks of the Rhine. Night has fallen. The moon is reflected in the river. Gutrune enters the Hall from her room.

Gutrune was in a state of derangement. She thought she heard Siegfried coming home, then wondered who the woman was she saw going to the Rhine. Was it Brünnhilde? Then she went to see if Brünnhilde was in her room. It was empty, so it was her she saw going down to the Rhine! If only I heard his horn, she thought. If only I see him soon.

Gutrune was about to go back to her room when she was terrified and transfixed by Hagen's voice. He told her to get up and greet Siegfried, her hero. She was frightened. She hadn't heard Siegfried's horn.

'Your pale hero, he'll blow his horn no more,' said Hagen. 'No more hunting or fighting, and no more chasing beautiful women.'

'What's that they're bringing?' asked Gutrune.

Hagen enjoyed his cruelty. 'That's a wild boar's booty – Siegfried, your dead husband!'

Gutrune fainted over his dead body. She thought Gunther had killed him out of jealousy, but Gunther pointed to Hagen.

'Yes,' said Hagen, 'I was the wild boar that killed him. He was picked out for me. It was on my spear that he perjured himself, and I claim my rightful holy booty and demand that Ring.'

'Get back,' said Gunther. 'Never will what came down to me be yours. How dare you touch Gutrune's inheritance, you shameless brute!'

The two men fought and Hagen killed Gunther on the spot.

'Give me the Ring!' he shouted and reached for Siegfried's hand, which raised itself with a threatening gesture. Hagen drew back. Gutrune and the women screamed. Then Brünnhilde stepped into the back of the Hall and walked to the front with firm and solemn step.

'Stop your clamorous misery,' she began. 'His wife comes now to avenge him you have all betrayed. I've heard children grizzle to their mother over spilled milk, but not a single sound worthy of my noblest hero.'

Gutrune dared interrupt her to say that it was all Brünnhilde's fault.

'Be silent, pitiful woman,' said Brünnhilde. 'You were never his wife. You were nothing but his mistress. I am his wife to whom he swore everlasting love before he even set eyes on you.'

Gutrune suddenly understood and cursed Hagen for giving her the potion with which she had taken Brünnhilde from Siegfried. 'How clear it is to me now,' she said, 'that Brünnhilde was the beloved which the potion made him forget.' And she turned away from Siegfried's body towards Gunther's, which she bent over, dying in great pain.

Brünnhilde was pleased to hear what Gutrune said. She did not have to explain anymore. She ordered a funeral pyre to be built on which to burn the noblest hero. Her horse Grane was brought too. Her own body was longing to share in Siegfried's highest honour.

Then Brünnhilde gave a funeral oration.

'No one swore oaths more strongly than Siegfried. No one was truer to contracts. No lover loved more deeply than he. Yet no oaths, no contracts, no true love were broken as much as he broke them. Do you know how that was possible?'

'Oh, ye gods! Cast your eyes over what I have suffered, and understand your own eternal guilt. Oh, Wotan, noblest of gods, through Siegfried's most heroic of deeds – which you so urgently desired – you condemned him to inherit the very curse you had brought upon yourself. All this so that the purest of men should betray me, so that a woman might attain wisdom.'

Then Brünnhilde committed Siegfried's body to the funeral pyre, but first drew the Ring from his finger.

'Accursed trinket,' she said, 'terrifying Ring! I grasp your gold and give it back to the wise sisters – the swimming daughters of the Rhine, whom I thank for their wisdom. Let the fire that will consume me cleanse the Ring from its curse.'

Now the Twilight of the Gods had come. Brünnhilde summoned Loge to set fire to Valhalla, and she herself threw a great torch into the funeral pyre. Then she talked to Grane, her faithful horse, which she had lent Siegfried, took off his bridle, leaped on him bareback and jumped with him into the flames.

Far below in the river, she heard Hagen shouting for the Ring, and saw him being swept underwater by two of the Rhinemaidens, while a third triumphantly held the Ring aloft.

Then the swollen Rhine overflowed its banks, while the gods were engulfed in flames.

End of *The Curse of Ring*

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