THE SOURCES OF
RICHARD WAGNER'S
"DER RING DES NIBELUNGEN"

BY

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THE SOURCES OF RICHARD WAGNER'S
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The beginning of the immortal tale of the Nibelungen Ring was doubtless shaped in that prehistoric age when our Aryan progenitors still dwelt in their Asiatic homes. As they separated and migrated the myth gradually assumed different forms with each branch of the race, and where the Greeks speak of the victory of Apollo over Python, of Hercules over the Dragon of the Hesperides, and many other stories, all symbolizing the triumph of Light over Darkness, the Teutonic races speak of Siegfried's contest with the serpent Fafner, or of Beowulf's slaying of the Fire-Drake.

The great Siegfried legend was originally the production of the German people, although Wagner has used chiefly the Norse form of the materials. The Scandinavian bards obtained some of their ideas from Germany, and thus came about the mingling of Norse mythology and Teutonic fable.

When the dominion of Rome in the west of Europe was overthrown in 476 A. D. the Teutonic race occupied the country from the banks of the Rhine and the Danube to the coasts of Norway. The invaders who settled in the southern provinces
soon lost their distinctive speech, but in Germany and Scandinavia the old tongues remained, and consequently poetic recitations, the custom of long centuries, continued. Tacitus says that the people of these northern lands were accustomed to store their history in rhyming chronicles repeated by the bards. During the reign of Charlemagne (742-814) these chronicles were collected. Although nothing remains of this collection, it can hardly be doubted that some of the materials found in the Siegfried legend formed part of the old stories of the bards, for it has been traced back to the sixth century, when its germs were recognizable. In the first preserved form of the story of this hero's exploits we find recorded the fabulous history of times not widely separated from those of the conquest of Rome's western Empire, for in the sixth century appeared in tradition the names not only of Siegfried and Dietrich von Bern, but Theodoric the Great and Attila.

Wagner utilized the salient points of the German and of the Norse forms of the Siegfried story, but found more suitable material in the Norse sagas than in the German forms.

Of the German forms, the first preserved one of the legend is called the "Heldenbuch" (Book of Heroes). In its present state it dates from the latter part of the twelfth century, but there is evidence that it existed long before that period. It is a collection of poems dealing with events of the time of Attila and the German invasions of Rome. The principle characters are Etzel, or Attila; Dietrich, or Theodoric the Great; Siegfried, Gudrune, Hagan, and others who reappear in
the "Nibelungen Lied." The period of events occurring in Wagner's dramas may be estimated by the formation of a succession of incidents leading back to Attila, an historical personage with an established date. In "The Horny Siegfried," one of the poems of the "Heldenbuch," we find matter which serves as a prelude to the "Nibelungen Lied."

Among the Nibelungen traditions, the "Nibelungen Lied" takes foremost rank. It is the greatest poem of mediaeval Germany, composed during the end of the twelfth century, and imbued with the spirit of feudalism and Christianity. The idea of the original lays of the Nibelungs appears partly clouded, but the poem is of such beauty and grandeur that it is considered one of the greatest of the epic poems. It is chiefly concerned with the deeds and personality of Siegfried.

Wagner took his fundamental facts for "Der Ring des Nibelungen" mostly from the earlier traditions, consequently consulted chiefly the poems and sagas of the Scandinavian north. During the despotic reign of King Harold Hárfager in Norway, the flower of the Norwegian race began to migrate to Iceland, taking with them the best of the ancient culture of their home, the spirit of freedom, the love of song and poetry, and all those characteristics common to the whole Teutonic race. They preserved the early traditions and customs of their forefathers more thoroughly than those on the continent as they were more isolated, and among the Icelandic poems and sagas the following should be mentioned.
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The "Elder Edda," or Saemund's Edda, consists of a series of lays more or less independent of each other collected by Saemund the Wise, who lived 1056-1131. They divide into two parts, a mythic and an heroic, into poems relating to the ancient gods, and poems of heroes of antiquity. The old parchment of the Elder Edda seems to have been written about 1300 A. D., and was sent to Denmark in the middle of the 17th century as a present from the Icelandic bishop, Brynjolf Sveinsson, to King Frederic the Third. Several pages of this are missing, among them being those which contain an important part of Siegfried's (Sigurd's) life, that from his first meeting with Brunhild to his death, and their contents can only be inferred from the Volsunga Saga. Considered in connection with the poetry of Germany, the Edda literature in its nature and origin belongs to the whole Teutonic race. The Edda literature retained in the north a more original character, while assuming a specifically Norse garb. In the form in which they have been handed down they belong mostly to the eighth century, yet they originated in a prehistoric time when no difference had as yet been developed between Scandinavians and Germans.

The "Younger Edda," or Snorre's Edda, is a work composed at different times by different persons, and is a collection of prose narratives, a sort of commentary on the Elder Edda.

The "Volsunga Saga" is mytho-heroic. It is partly a paraphrase in prose of the songs of the Elder Edda, probably collected during the 13th century. The Volsunga Saga illustrates the manner in which the original and ancient nucleus of
the saga has received various additions in the course of time, other traditions having become united with the Volsung legends. The Sigurd traditions have become expanded by being united with traditions of the Viking King, Ragnar Lodbrok, the latter's wife, Aslaug, being represented as a daughter of Sigurd and Brynhild. This shows the tendency to connect prominent families with kings and heroes of the heroic age. The value of the Volsunga Saga in relation to the Nibelung tale lies in the fact that its compiler was acquainted with some of the lays of the Elder Edda now lost, and that he recounted their incidents for us. It supplied Wagner with the principal materials for three out of the four "Ring" dramas.

The "Thidrek Saga" of Dietrich von Bern, or Wilkina Saga, " including the "Niflunga Saga," collected towards the middle of the 13th century, was compiled from the saga-lore of Germany, or at least to a great extent, as the author repeatedly states. This saga bears the impress of later romantic tales in some parts, especially in the account of Siegfried's birth. Other portions, based on old Saxon songs and tales, agree with the Edda and Volsunga Saga. Still other portions are derived from later German lays, and agree in many points with the "Nibelungen Lied," particularly with its second part.

"The Nornagestsaga" of the 14th century is based on songs of the "Elder Edda," and is a curious blending of history and myth. Nornagest lived 300 years and related as an eye witness the deeds and death of Sigurd and other incidents of the Nibelungen story to King Olaf Trygvason.
In addition to the German and Norse poems and sagas, the old Danish folk-lore (from 14th to 16th century) may also be mentioned. It contains songs belonging to the Nibelungen subject either based on ancient northern traditions, or related to the second part of the "Nibelungen Lied." In the lonely isles of Faroe the old songs of Brunhild still resound to the present day.

Wagner sometimes arranged the material of his sources without any great modification, while now and then they underwent a striking transformation at his hands. Yet even in the latter case the principal facts and ideas of the myth remained the type or model of his creation; he has grasped the spirit of the myth.

Das Rheingold

The action begins in the depths of the Rhine showing the Rhine gold gleaming upon a peak which rises from the river bed. The Rhine maidens, who are its guardians, swim about it, singing. Alberich, Prince of the Nibelungs, finally secures the gold, and disappears with it to the underworld.

Wotan and his wife Fricka now enter into the story, and we are given a view of their new palace, Walhalla. According to the "Eddas," the gods dwelt in Asgard in the castle named Walhalla, the abode of slain heroes. These gods were not immortal, but were extraordinary beings gifted with wonderful length of days. The master of all the gods was Odin, or Wotan, the lord of war and of the hunt. The mother of the gods was
Fricka, the wife of Wotan, the Juno of the Norse mythology. Freya was goddess of Love, and Iduna, another goddess, had care of the golden apples of endless youth, of which the gods ate. Thor was wielder of the mighty hammer, made for him by the dwarfs, the Nibelungs, who dwelt in the subterranean places and were wondrous makers of weapons for the gods, whom, nevertheless, they hated.

According to Wagner the castle Walhalla had been built by the giants Fafner and Fasolt to insure for Wotan the sovereignty of the world, and the fee which the giants exacted was the goddess Freya, keeper of the golden apples of youth. Fricka upbraids Wotan for having made such a rash promise and Wotan thinks that with the help of Loki he may evade a payment which will deprive the world of its beauty, light and sweetness. Freya rushes in pursued by the giants and begs her father to save her. She also implores protection from her brothers Donner and Froh, gods of thunder and sunshine, but they are all helpless to save her. The "Elder Edda" tells the story as follows: Fear of the giants led the gods to desire to have the mighty burg Walhalla surrounded by a strong wall. By the advice of Loki, the god of fire and spirit of evil who was received among the gods because of his wonderful cunning, they swore a great oath to give the goddess Freya and the sun and moon to the builder of this wall, provided he had completed it before the coming of summer. If the work was then unfinished the contract was void. The builder, a Frost-Giant in disguise, asked only the aid of his horse Svadilfare, which was allowed.
The horse carried such vast stones that the work was almost completed several days before the time had expired. The gods held a council and asked each other who could have suggested giving Freya in marriage in Jothunheim (giant's land), or to plunge the air and heavens into darkness by giving away the sun and moon, and all agreed that the ill-counsellor Loki must have advised it. Thereupon they threatened Loki with cruel death if he could not contrive some way of preventing the builder from fulfilling the bargain. Loki changed himself into the form of a mare the next night and when he whinnied the horse ran after him and did no work. The giant, seeing that he was to lose his bargain, resumed his natural shape and the gods called Thor, who slew him with his hammer. So, as the "Wala's Prophecy" in the Elder Edda says:

Broken were oaths,
And words and promises -
All mighty speech
That had passed between them.

Thus did sin enter among the gods, and by the breaking of the oath they burdened themselves with guilt inexpiable. Evil portents came. Iduna sank, with her golden apples of eternal youth, to the lower depths, and could not be recalled. Baldur, the second son of Wotan, the holy one, into whose presence no impure thing might come, had terrible dreams. Hel, the goddess of the lower world and of death, appeared to him and beckoned him to follow her, and trouble began.

To return to Wagner's version, the castle has been built, the giants demand their fee and Loki has gone on his quest for something sufficiently alluring to give in place of
Freya. He returns and tells of the theft of the Rhine gold and of its possession by Alberich. When the giants hear of this gold and the power it possesses, they agree to accept it in place of Freya, whom they carry off as hostage. The absence of this guardian of the sacred apples of youth causes the gods to become visibly old, and Wotan resolves to obtain the Rhine gold whatever the cost may be.

Wotan and Loki go to the underworld where Alberich is king of the Nibelungs. By Loki's tricks they get the gold, but Alberich has cursed it. This account is related to the account found in the "Volsunga Saga" and the "Edda" of Hreidmar and the otter skin. Hreidmar had three sons, Fafnir, Otter, and Regin. Otter was so called because he used to change himself into that animal and go into Andvari's Lake to catch fish. One day Odin (Wotan), Hönir and Loki, three of the gods, came to the lake and Loki threw a stone at the otter and killed it. They took off the skin and went to the house of Hreidmar who recognized the skin as that of his son, and demanded that they pay as a ransom as much gold as would cover the skin when it stood upright. Loki knew that Andvari had a great store of gold, and went back to the lake, caught Andvari who was swimming in the form of a pike, and refused to release him until he gave up all his gold and also the magic ring by which the gold was obtained. In his wrath, Andvari cursed the gold and the ring, and declared that they should be the bane of everyone who possessed them. Loki and the other gods strove to cover the otter skin with gold, but it was necessary to add the ring to
cover the last visible spot, one of the otter's whiskers, and Loki announced the curse which had been put upon the ring and the gold. The curse began to take effect immediately upon the giant Hreidmar. Fafnir killed his father to get the gold and the ring, and grew so evil and selfish that he became a hideous dragon and lay watching his treasure.

Wagner has Loki gain the gold by trickery just as in the early tale, changing the details by having it happen on land and having Alberich conscious of the purpose of the gods. Alberich is so sure of his newly found power that he is reckless and at their bidding, by use of the tarnkappe made from the gold, changes himself first into a huge serpent, then into a toad. Wotan puts his foot upon the toad and Loki seizes the Tarnhelm (magic helmet) and they drag him to the upper air. They demand the gold and the ring also and Alberich in his rage curses it, saying that destruction shall come to the owner. The tale continues to follow the trend of the early tale, and the giants demand that Freya's ransom must be gold enough to cover her. When all the gold is piled about her and even the magic helmet has been added, as in the early tale, they still catch a glimpse of Freya's golden hair and Wotan is obliged to use the ring also as a cover. Wagner seems to introduce an original idea here, in having Wotan refuse to add the ring until Erda rises and tells him that to keep the ring means ruin.

As related in the "Volsunga Saga" and the "Eddas" the curse begins to work immediately and Fafner slays his brother and departs with all of the treasure.
The remainder of "Das Rheingold" seems to be Wagner's own invention.

Die Walküre

Between "Das Rheingold" and "Die Walküre" proper, Wotan seeks to regain the gold which he secured and gave to Fafner as a reward for his labor. He descends into the domain of the earth goddess to consult her whose wisdom enables her to know everything. Wotan woos and marries the earth goddess and to them are born nine daughters, the Valkyries, who are to assist him in the work their mother predicts for him. The story here agrees with that of the "Elder Edda" which says that the Valkyries followed Wotan on the field of battle and as Wish-Maidens, choosers of the slain, consecrated the fallen heroes with kisses and carried them away to Walhalla. There they ate of the feast of the blessed and waited to aid Wotan in his final battle with the powers of evil.

In Wagner's drama, Wotan resolves to breed a race of heroes to win the gold from the monster and in the guise of the man Volse unites himself to a mortal woman who bears him the Volsung twins, Siegmund and Sieglinde. The "Volsunga Saga" gives the following account of Siegmund and Sieglinde. Sigi was the son of Wotan, who, with the aid of his father, conquered the land of the Huns, the giants. Sigi had a son Rerir, a mighty warrior, who obtained the land and kingdom of his father.
The son of Rerir was Valse, who married a giant's daughter. They had ten sons and one daughter, the eldest son, Sigmund, and the daughter, Signy (Sieglinde), being twins and the fairest and foremost of the children of King Valse.

In the midst of Valse's palace stood the mighty tree Branstock, with its branches piercing the roof. Signy was wedded to King Siggeir of Gothland, at the command of her father, and on the evening of the wedding day an old, one-eyed man, wrapped in a robe, a huge stranger, entered the room. He drew his sword and thrust it up to its hilt in the trunk of the tree, and declared that whoever could withdraw it might have it to use, and would find that it surpassed any sword he had before used. The old man left and the noblemen assembled immediately tried to withdraw the sword, but Sigmund was the only one who could do so, and he did it with ease. Siggeir offered him thrice its weight in gold for the sword, but Sigmund kept what the god had given him. Siggeir, wrathful at the refusal, left the country with his sorrowing wife, after bidding Valse with his sons and followers to come and visit him after three months had passed. When they came he fell upon them and slew Valse and set his sons in a wood to be devoured by wolves. Sigmund escaped with the help of Signy, and dwelt in the woods. Signy, desiring to avenge the death of her kindred, sent her sons to Sigmund to be tested as to their fitness for the task. He found them unfit and slew them. Signy put a witch to sleep with her husband and in disguise went to Sigmund's hut and asked for shelter. She abode there three nights and then re-
turned home. The son she bore, Sinjötlí, was a true Volsung, and Sigmund brought him up in fierce hardihood so as to prepare him to avenge the death of Välse. Father and son roamed through the woods disguised as wolves and accomplished many valiant deeds. At last, at Signy's behest, they avenged the death of her father and brothers on King Siggeir by setting fire to the royal hall, and Signy, after revealing that Sinjötlí was a full-blooded Volsung, died with her husband.

Wagner's version has Hunding, a savage hunter, kill the mother and steal the daughter while Volse and his son Sigmund are away from home. Father and son swear vengeance upon their enemy. When Sigmund has grown to manhood his father disappears leaving behind nothing but a wolf's skin. Sigmund is forced to fight his enemies alone, and while defending a maiden he is overpowered and seeks refuge in a hut. It is Hunding's hut, where Sieglinde dwells as his enforced wife. Sigmund and Sieglinde, not recognizing each other, are drawn together by a strange power of attraction. Hunding enters and upon hearing Sigmund's story realizes him to be his mortal foe, and orders him to fight in the morning.

Sigmund, left alone, bemoans the loss of his sword but remembers his father's promise that in the hour of need a weapon would be provided. Sieglinde comes to him and points out the sword embedded in the ash tree which supports the hut. This incident corresponds exactly to that of the "Volsunga Saga", an unbidden guest having thrust the sword into the tree trunk on Sieglinde's wedding day, saying at the same time that
it should belong to him who could draw it forth. Siegmund
draws the sword forth and gives it the name Nothung or Need-
ful. The brother and sister now recognize their relationship
and fall into each other's arms, plighting their strange troth.

In the next act Wotan tells his favorite Brunnhilde,
the leader of the Valkyries, of the conflict which is to take
place between Siegmund and Hunding, and bids her give the vic-
tory to Siegmund. Wotan's wife Fricka, goddess of wedlock,
takes Hunding's part and finally compels Wotan to reverse the
decree of victory so that Hunding, the wronged husband, shall
triumph. Wotan calls Brunnhilde and tells her to reverse the
victory, although he is extremely distressed because he feels
that Siegmund is the only one who can free him from the curse
of the ring.

Siegmund and Sieglinde appear fleeing from the wrath
of Hunding. His passionate love for his sister-bride so moves
Brunnhilde that she decides to save him, but Wotan interferes,
and Siegmund splinters his sword against Wotan's spear. Hund-
ing kills Siegmund, and then Wotan kills Hunding. Brunnhilde
collects the fragments of Siegmund's sword and escapes with the
fainting Sieglinde upon her horse. Sieglinde pleads for death,
but Brunnhilde bids her live for the sake of Siegfried, the
son she is to bear, who shall be the greatest hero of the world.
Brunnhilde bestows upon her the fragments of Siegmund's sword
and bids her escape to the forest where Fafner the dragon
watches over the Ring and whither Wotan dares not go.

This version of Wagner's is quite different in some
respects from the "Volsunga Saga" which gives the account in the following manner. After the destruction of King Siggeir and the death of Signy, Sigmund, together with his son, returned and took charge of his hereditary realm, becoming mighty and far-famed. He married Borghild and they had a son Helgi. The valkyr Sigrun protected Helgi in battle against her father's wishes. She hated the man her father wished her to marry, but loved and married Helgi. Borghild hated Sinfjötli and poisoned him, and therefore Sigmund drove her away and married Hjórdis. Hjórdis had been wooed by Lyngi, a son of Hunding, but preferred Sigmund as he was the more famous hero, though somewhat advanced in years. The Hunding made war upon Sigmund, whose sword was broken in the battle by the spear of an old, one-eyed man who was wrapped in a mantle. Dying, Sigmund gave the pieces of his sword to Hjórdis to keep for her son, who was to be the greatest of the Volsungs. Sigmund died and Hjórdis went to the court of the King of Denmark where she bore a son Sigurd (Siegfried).

The "Volsunga Saga" and the "Eddas" have been followed almost absolutely by Wagner in his account of Brunnhilde being put to sleep by her father Wotan, with the exception that Wagner's Wotan seems to show more tenderness, putting Brunnhilde to sleep with a kiss, while in the earlier stories Wotan puts her to sleep with a sleep-thorne.
Siegfried

Wagner has Sieglinde wander about in the forest and finally, starving and exhausted, find herself in the cave of Mimi, the dwarf brother of Alberich. Siegfried is born here and his mother, dying, entrusts him to the care of Mimi, who brings him up in ignorance of his real parentage. According to the "Volsunga Saga" Sigurd (Siegfried) is born and raised at the court of Hjalprek, King of the Franks, and his mother later married the king's son Alf. Sigurd's foster father, called Regin, son of Hreidmar, taught Sigurd all sorts of arts, the lore of runes, and the speech of many tongues. The "Nibelungen Lied" says his parents were Sigmund, King of the Netherlands, and the Queen Sieglinde. It also says that he was brought up in the arts of chivalry customary to kings' sons, and that his father and mother were still living when Siegfried left home as a knight in quest of adventures. The versions nearest to Wagner are those of the "Lied vom Hüren Seyfried" (taken from the "Heldenbuch") and the "Thidrek Saga." In the latter and in the second part of the former, Siegfried does not know his parents, and is brought up by a smith. In both accounts Siegfried is an impetuous and unmanageable youth as in the later popular German tales. In the "Thidrek Saga" the smith was called Mimir (Mime), and his brother was Regin, who had assumed the form of a dragon.

In Wagner's drama Mimi is preparing to use Siegfried as a tool to get the treasure from Fafner the dragon. Siegfried finally makes Mimi tell him of his true parentage, and
Mimi produces the pieces of Siegmund's sword, which Wotan has told him can be re-forged only by one who knows not the meaning of fear. Siegfried then carefully casts the sword and hammers the blade into shape. He strikes the anvil to test the strength of the sword, and the anvil splits in twain, while Mimi sinks in terror to the floor. This differs from the "Volsunga Saga" in that Siegfried re-welds the sword instead of Mimi.

In the "Volsunga Saga" and the "Eddas" Sigurd's foster father Regin hoped to make use of the heroic boy, and sent him to the woods to choose himself a horse. On the way Sigurd met an old, one-eyed man who bade him drive the horses into the water and to choose the one which swam across the river. This horse was Grani, and it was of the strain of Wotan's wonderful eight-legged horse Sleipnir.

The character of Alberich as used by Wagner at this time seems to be his own invention, as he does not appear at this time in the early traditions. There are only the characters of the smith Mimi (Regin), Siegfried (Sigurd), Fafner the dragon, and Wotan the Wanderer. Alberich and the dragon, according to Wagner, are warned by Wotan of the approach of a fearless one who will wrest the treasure from the Nibelungs.

The "Thidrek Saga" says that Mimi was so much afraid of Siegfried that he sent him to the forest for coal hoping that he would be killed by the dragon, but that Siegfried slew the dragon and roasted its body over a fire. He dipped his finger into the bubbling blood to see if the monster was roasted,
burned his finger and put it into his mouth, whereupon he understood the voices of the birds which warned him of Mimi's intentions. He anointed himself in the dragon's blood thus becoming invulnerable except at a spot between the shoulders which he could not reach. He then went home to Mime who gave him costly presents to pacify his wrath, among which was the sword Gram, which had belonged to Sigmund. Siegfried seized the sword and slew Mime.

According to the "Volsunga Saga" and the "Eddas," Regin (Mimi) told Sigurd (Siegfried) of a dragon Fafnir which guarded a mighty store of gold, and he bade Sigurd kill the dragon and procure the gold. Regin also told how Fafnir came to possess the gold, and related the story of Hreidmar and his three sons Fafnir, Otter and Regin, as related in connection with "Das Rheingold."

The idea of the primitive abode of the gold in the Rhine and of its later acquisition by the dark Elves or Nibelungs is not distinctly brought forward in the "Nibelungen Lied," yet the gloomy origin of the treasure is not entirely forgotten. It is known that Nibelung and Schilbung, the sons of old King Nibelung, had quarrelled about their paternal inheritance and were slain by Siegfried. To avenge his masters, Alberich, king of the Elves, attacked Siegfried, but Siegfried was victorious and became possessor of the gold and the Tarnkappe, or magic cap of darkness, together with the celebrated wishing-rod. To the Tarnkappe correspond, in the northern traditions, Siegfried's power of changing semblance, and the helmet of terror, Aeger's
helmet, made by Regin, taken by Fafnir with the hoard and gained by Siegfried after the dragon's death. The ring of the dwarf Andvari by which the gold could be renewed is identical with the wishing-rod, in so far as by the latter the treasure could always be replaced.

In the "Volsunga Saga" and the "Eddas" Regin (Mimi) forged the sword Gram for Siegfried and as he bore it forth it seemed as though fire burned along the edges of it. Siegfried cleft the anvil in twain with it. After avenging his father's death on the whole race of Hundings, which idea is not used by Wagner, he went where Fafnir was wont to creep for water. Regin was afraid and stayed behind, but advised Siegfried to dig a hole in the ground and from it smite the dragon to the heart, hoping that Siegfried might be stifled in the pit by the blood flowing from the monster's wounds. Siegfried by the advice of Wotan, who came to him in the guise of an old man, dug several pits for the blood of the dragon to run into, and he sat in one of them. The dragon appeared, loudly roaring, but Siegfried knew not the meaning of fear, and when the beast crept over the pits Siegfried thrust his sword up to the hilt under the left shoulder of the dragon, and drew it out again. The beast in its death struggles lashed its head and tail in a terrible manner, and asked Siegfried who he was. Siegfried tried to conceal his name for fear of being cursed by name, but the dragon would not be misled, so he told his name. Fafnir tried to scare him away but Siegfried said he was going to get the gold. Fafnir told him where it was, also that it would be
his bane, and then died. At the command of Regin, Siegfried roasted the dragon's heart on a spit and when the blood bubbled out he laid his finger upon it to see if it was done, put his finger in his mouth, and was enabled to understand the birds and their warning of Regin's evil designs. Wagner's Mimi accompanies Siegfried in quest of the dragon but is dismissed by Siegfried who is disgusted with the dwarf's protestations of love. He summons the dragon by blowing upon his hunting-horn. Wagner does not use the idea of the pits which we find in the "Volsunga Saga" and the "Eddas," but has Siegfried fight the monster in an open battle. As in the former stories, Siegfried is warned by the dragon of the curse upon the Ring and Gold. He does not roast the dragon's heart and eat it, and drink its blood and that of Regin whom he kills at the birds' advice, as told in the "Volsunga Saga" and "Eddas," but as he draws the blade from the dragon's body a drop of fiery blood falls upon his hand and he seeks to alleviate the burn by touching it with his lips. This blood enables him to understand the voices of the birds, according to an old tradition which is quite universal. The words of the eagle in the "Eddas" come very close to those of the forest bird in Wagner's version:

**Eagle's words in "Eddas"**

"Here lies Regin (Mime) Contemplating
How to deceive the man Who trusts him;
Thinks in his wrath Of false accusations.
The evil smith plots Revenge 'gainst the brother."

**Forest Bird, Act II, "Siegfried"**

"Oh trust not in Mime, The treacherous elf!
Heareth Siegfried but sharply The shifty hypocrite's words What at heart he means Shall by Mime be shown."
Wagner has the bird tell where the treasure is, while in the old stories the dragon reveals it before his death. The old traditions have Siegfried kill Regin (Mime) before he goes for the gold, but Wagner has him get the gold first and at the second warning of the birds Siegfried kills Mimi while the brother Alberich laughs at the sight. The bird again speaks and tells of Brunnhilde lying in fire-girdled slumber, just as the old stories relate it.

Wotan in "Siegfried" conjures Erda out of the earth to tell him what the future of the gods is to be, but she can tell him nothing but that the time of Brunnhilde's awakening is at hand. This scene is quite different from that portrayed in the "Elder Edda," in which the Wala (Erda) foretells the death of Baldur, the second son of Wotan, which is the fore-shadowing of the end of the gods. According to Wagner, Wotan bars Siegfried's path, as he is on his way to Brunnhilde, and they have a contest in which Siegfried shivers to pieces Wotan's spear, the emblem of the god's authority.

The account given by Wagner of Siegfried's passing through the wall of fire is practically identical with that of the "Volsunga Saga" and the "Eddas."
Götterdämmerung

The idea of the three Norns or goddesses of Fate is an old tradition and seems to be introduced here as Wagner's own idea.

According to Wagner, Siegfried and Brunnhilde separate the next morning, he giving her the fatal ring as a pledge of faith and she giving him her horse Grane. She begs him not to forget her, sends him forth to fulfill his mission in the world, and waits his return behind the wall of flames. The "Volsunga Saga" and the "Eddas" say that they met a second time at the house of Heimir, and that she prophesied that he would marry Gudrun but Siegfried vowed he would marry none but Brunnhild, and gave her the fatal ring of Andvari as a pledge. This is but a prologue and the "Götterdämmerung" proper begins with the hall of the Gibichungs on the Rhine.

When the Nibelung myth in Germany became a hero-saga, it was combined and blended with the saga of the historical Burgundians, whose king Gundicar was slain, with thousands of his followers, by the Huns in 437. The "Lex Burgundionum" mentions four kings, whose names are Gibica (Gibich), Godomar, Gislahar (Giselher), and Gundahar (Gunther). The combination of myth and saga was brought about by the Franks, which is apparent from the fact that the earliest evidences of the name "Nibelung" as an historical appellation are Frankish. The Burgundian kings are called Franci Nebulones in "Waltharius," and the Rhine Franks in "Biterolf" and the "Lament;" moreover the word "Nibelung" (Nivelongus or Nivelo) occurs as an historical
name of Frankish princes in documents of the 8th and 9th centuries. Thus in the German traditions the Gibichungs appear as Burgundian kings dwelling at Worms on the Rhine, the transformation having been brought about by the influence of history, the identity of mythical and historical names (Gibich and Gibica; Gundahar, Gunicar and Gunther; Gislahar and Giselhar), and other circumstances. Hagen, who did not belong to those historical Burgundians, was retained in the saga, and together with his name of a "Frank" he preserved his "more than heroic nature." In "Waltharius" he is no relation of the royal house, but is said to be of the Trojan race, a statement based on an old tradition of the descent of the Franks from Troy. In all the German poems of the 12th and 13th centuries he is a relative of the kings, and their most powerful, trusty and distinguished vassal. In the "Eddas" and in the "Volsunga Saga" he is one of the royal brothers, bears himself nobly, and protests against Siegfried's murder, yet does not shrink from sharing the responsibility for the deed after it has been done. In the north the name of Högni (Hagen) was associated with lofty deeds, and the assassination of Siegfried devolved upon Gutterm, a step brother of the kings. The fact as given in the "Thidrek Saga" that Hagen was a descendant from an elf, a Nibelung, is without doubt an ancient tradition. It was only by the change of the Gibichungs into Burgundian kings that Hagen became a mere relative of the royal house.

The "Volsunga Saga" says that King Giuki ruled south of the Rhine. He had three sons, Gunnar (Gunther), Högni (Hagen),
and Guttorm, and one daughter Gudrun. His wife Grimhild was skilled in magic arts. Grimhild saw that Siegfried was a great and wealthy hero, and desired him as a husband for her daughter. She knew that he was devoted to Brunhild, as he spoke of her so often, but prepared a drink of forgetfulness for him which caused Brunhild to pass out of his mind. He saw how fair Gudrun was and when her brothers offered her to him for his bride he accepted gladly. Siegfried married Gudrun and swore the oath of brotherhood with her brothers, Gunnar and Hógni. In Wagner's version Gunther is ruler, and has a sister Gutrune and a half-brother Hagen who is the son of Alberich the dwarf, as the "Thidrek Saga" says, and therefore of an evil nature. Hagen has been charged by his father to get back the gold and immediately plans Siegfried's ruin when he hears that he has arrived. When Siegfried lands from his boat at the door of the hall Gutrune offers him the drink of welcome, which contains a potion of forgetfulness. He pledges the drink to Brunnhilde, but when he drinks the potion all memory of his loved one dies away and he is infatuated with Gutrune. Gunther speaks of Brunnhilde whom he covets for his wife, and Siegfried offers to pass the magic barrier and win her if he may have Gutrune for his bride. The compact is made and the two men swear brotherhood. In the "Volsunga Saga" the queen Grimhild was the one who planned everything, and urged Gunther to seek Brynhild for his bride.

The incident of the visit of Brunnhilde's sister to Brunnhilde urging the return of the ring to the Rhine maidens seems to be original with Wagner.
The account of the wavering fire to be passed through in order to reach Brunnhilde is contained in the "Volsunga Saga" and the "Eddas," but the "Heldenbuch" and the "Nibelungen Lied" mention feats of strength and skill in which Brunnhilde's suitors had to match their skill with hers, she being obliged to marry the successful competitor, the others being condemned to death. Siegfried rendered himself invisible by the Tarnkappe and aided Gunther in the combat so that he defeated Brunnhilde. According to the "Volsunga Saga" Sigurd and Gunnar (Gunther) change shapes after a manner taught them by the queen, and Brynhild does not dare to refuse to be his bride because of the oath she made to marry the man who passed through the fire. He took away Andvari's ring and her girdle and she married Gunnar. Wagner has his Brunnhilde repulse Gunther's rough wooing until in the struggle he seizes the ring from her finger at which her supernatural strength leaves her and she goes with him.

The action in Wagner's drama moves along much more swiftly than in the old legends. Upon the return of Siegfried and Gunther with Brunnhilde, the wedding is about to take place. Brunnhilde attempts to arouse Siegfried's affection for her, but he turns to Gutrune. She catches sight of the ring and demands to know how he dares to wear the pledge Gunther wrested from her. Siegfried denies that he took it from her, remembering only that he got it from Fafner. Hagen hastens to assure Brunnhilde that Siegfried got it by deceit and vows that the traitor shall pay for the villainy. With this the quarrel
begins. The "Younger Edda," the "Nibelungen Lied" and the "Volsunga Saga" have the quarrel arise between the two wives Gudrun (Gutrune) and Brynhild through a comparison of their two husbands. Gudrun declared that her husband was the greater as it was he who had overcome Brynhild on the mountain and made her marry Gunnar, and produced the ring and girdle as evidence. Brynhild became very angry and was eager for revenge. The "Elder Edda" mentions no quarrel between Gudrun and Brynhild. In the "Götterdämmerung" the misunderstanding deepens and Brunnhilde declares that she has been as a wife to Siegfried while Siegfried insists that he has dealt honestly with his blood-brother. Gunther is half convinced of Siegfried's treachery and gives way to indignation and distrust. Siegfried affectionately draws Gutrune from the circle and they all leave excepting Brunnhilde, Gunther and Hagen. These three plan Siegfried's murder to take place the next day in the forest, the murder to be explained as a hunting accident.

The "Volsunga Saga" gives the following account of the plotting and murder of Siegfried. Brunnhild was very angry to think Siegfried, her only love, had deceived her and although he told her he loved her when in his right mind and offered to put away Gudrun and marry her, she refused to be consoled. She told Gunther Siegfried must die and although Gunther thought of his oath of brotherhood, he also thought of the gold, and agreed that Siegfried must die. Guttorm, the step-brother of Gunther, who had not sworn the oath of brotherhood was urged to commit the murder, being offered great rewards and honor.
Guttorm, purposely excited by magic drinks, tried twice to kill Siegfried as he lay on his bed, but found Siegfried awake. The third time he found him asleep and thrust a sword clear through him, piercing the one vital spot. Siegfried awoke, seized the sword Gram and cast it after Guttorm, cutting him in two. Brunhild laughed heartily when she heard Gudrun's loud wailing, but her hideous joy soon turned to woe and she foretold the disaster that would follow Siegfried's death. She then thrust a sword into her side and sank on the pillows of her couch, while she asked Gunther to have her borne to Siegfried's funeral pyre and burned there by his side.

The "Younger Edda" and most of the songs of the "Elder Edda" as well as the "Volsunga Saga" relate that Siegfried was murdered while in his bed asleep, but according to the "Lay of Brunhild" and the "Second Lay of Gudrun" in the "Elder Edda" he was slain out-of-doors. At the end of the "Lay of Brunhild" the collector of the poems wrote a few lines in prose referring to these different tales of Siegfried's death, also stating that according to German tradition he was murdered in the woods. All agree that he was treacherously slain.

Wagner follows the account in the "Nibelungen Lied" more closely than any of the others in this instance. The "Nibelungen Lied" says that Hagen, a descendant from the Nibelungs, made a solemn vow that Siegfried must atone for Brunhild's sorrow. With his wily tongue he won over the weak nature of Gunther by telling him of the danger of having such a great wealthy, powerful king as Siegfried live. Kriemhild (Gudrun),
struck with fatal blindness, believed Hagen to be a sincere friend to Siegfried and confided the secret of Siegfried’s one vital spot on his back between the shoulders. Gunther ordered a great hunt to take place in which Siegfried was to take part. While Siegfried was stooping to drink from a spring Hagen stealthily put Siegfried’s sword and bow beyond his reach, and taking the hero’s spear which leaned against a linden tree thrust it through the cross which Kriemhild had embroidered on her husband’s back to show where he could be wounded. Siegfried took his shield and with the deadly spear sticking in his back overtook the fleeing traitor and smote him with the shield until it broke in pieces. Thus Siegfried died. In this account where Brunhild’s pride and not her love of Siegfried seems to be the motive for her action, there seems to be no reason why she should seek death after her honor had been avenged and she sinks into insignificance. Hagen has the hoard sunk in the Rhine. Kriemhild wreaks cruel vengeance on her brothers and on Hagen for Siegfried’s death. In the "Eddas" and the "Volsunga Saga" she becomes reconciled to her brothers and avenges their death on their murderer, her second husband, Atli. It was twenty-six years after Siegfried’s death when she carried out her plan of revenge against her brothers. How long this was before Attila’s (Atli) death is not related, but we know he died in 453 A. D. at the age of about forty-seven. As she accomplished her revenge after she was married thirteen years to Atli and the revenge took place about 452, Siegfried probably died about 426, at any rate in the early part of the fifth century. Much of
the supernatural element of "Götterdämmerung" belongs to the store of fable coming from that period.

All of the accounts relate the fact that Seigfried was invulnerable except in one spot between the shoulders which the "Heldenbuch" says was caused by a leaf falling there while he was bathing in the dragon's blood. This account goes on to say that having rescued the beautiful Chriemhild from dragons or a giant, and having obtained possession of the treasures of the dwarfs, Seigfried returns her to her father, King of Wurms, and then marries her. She quarrels with her brother's wife Brunhild over the superiority of her husband and the story from here is practically identical with that of the "Nibelungen Lied."

In Wagner's drama the Rhine daughters warn Seigfried of his approaching death at which he laughs, knowing not the meaning of fear. In the "Elder Edda" the Wala prophesies the death of Wotan's son, Baldur, and Fricka begs all things living or inanimate to swear that they will not injure Baldur. She overlooks the mistletoe, and Loki, noting the omission, makes a dart of this wood and gives it to the blind god Hödur. He in sport shoots the dart at Baldur, who is supposed to be safe from harm, and the bright one falls dead. In like manner in all the legends Seigfried is invulnerable save for one small spot between his shoulders.

Wagner follows the "Nibelungen Lied" for a time, and Siegfried's murder takes place in the forest among a hunting party planned by Hagen, Brunnhilde and Gunther. The party sit
drinking and Siegfried begins relating incidents of his youth to entertain the party. This idea is original with Wagner, and continues so until the murder. Hagen slyly squeezes the juice of an herb into Siegfried's cup which undoes the work of the magic draught of forgetfulness. He reaches the point where he awakens Brunnhilde with a kiss and tells joyously of how he made her his bride, when Gunther starts up with a cry of surprise and anger. Two ravens, Wotan's messengers, fly across the scene, Siegfried turns to see them, and, just as in the "Nibelungen Lied," Hagen smites him in the back with his spear. The following scene is mostly original with Wagner. The dying hero breathes the name of Brunnhilde. Hagen stalks moodily away and the vassals mournfully carry Siegfried's body to the castle, where Gutrune anxiously awaits the return of her husband. Gutrune gives herself up to grief and refuses to believe that Siegfried was killed by a boar. Hagen then boldly acknowledges his deed and when Gunther starts to take the ring from Siegfried's finger Hagen kills him too. When he in turn snatches at the gold the dead man's hand is threateningly raised and Hagen falls back in dismay.

Brunnhilde now advances. She understands at last about the draught of forgetfulness. She bids Gutrune remember that she alone was Siegfried's lawful wife and Gutrune, filled with shame, creeps over to the dead body of her brother and weeps there. As in the "Volsunga Saga," Brunnhilde cares to live no longer, as her only love is dead, and orders a funeral pyre erected. Wagner brings his drama to a brilliant climax.
by having Brunnhilde herself fling the brand into the pile while Wotan's ravens circle above. Leaping upon her horse Grane, she rides into the flames with a bound. The flames tower high and the river rises to quench them. On the highest wave are seen the Rhine daughters. Hagen plunges into the river to seize the gold he covets and is drawn down by two of the maidens. The third maiden recovers the ring from the ashes of Brunnhilde on the pyre and holds it triumphantly aloft. Walhalla is seen burning and Wotan and his gods sit calmly waiting their annihilation. The older order passes, giving place to the new, for the world has been redeemed from its curse by self-sacrificing human love.
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