

DER RING DES NIBELUNGEN

The Ring of the Nibelung

by Richard Wagner

Synopsis, slightly abridged

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(Originally written for a friend, but, just in case that someone else might want to read it, too ...)

Prelude: Rhinegold

Day 1: The Valkyrie

Day 2: Siegfried

Day 3: Twilight of the Gods

Dramatis personae, roughly in order of appearance:

Rhinemaids

Nibelungs (a race of dwarfs living in the depths of the Earth)

Gods

Goddesses

Giants

Heroes

Humans

Valkyries

Some more humans

Names of characters and parts of the plot are taken from, or have been inspired by, various German and Nordic sagas and myths, but neither do the characters have much in common with their namesakes, nor does the plot much conform to the original tales.

PROLOGUE: RHINEGOLD

The prologue starts with a prologue to the prologue:

In the waters of the Rhine, the three Rhinemaidens guard the Rhinegold, an immeasurable treasure. They are happy and carefree girls, gaily singing and dancing, for their job is an easy one: the gold is perfectly safe, no one *can* possibly steal it.

Enters Alberich, one of the Nibelungs. He lusts for the maidens, who joyfully tease and taunt and ridicule him — this is under water, they are in their element! But, he not only lusts after the girls, he also has cast an eye upon the gold. The girls laugh even louder — no one can take the gold, except someone who forswears love, and nobody can do that, can they?

Alberich proves them wrong.

The gold is gone, the Rhinemaidens are left in utter despair — the harmony of the world has been broken, they wail and cry ...

The Beginning of the Story Proper

Wotan, god of war, chief of the gods, has commissioned the construction of a new headquarter of the gods, Valhalla. The two builders, the giants Fafner and Fasolt, who are brothers, have just finished building it. Now they demand their stipulated fee, but Wotan is short of cash. In fact, being top god, he hadn't really given this mundane matter much thought.

Considering this to be a minor problem, he tells Fafner and Fasolt to either wait for their money or get stuffed, but they, to put some

emphasis to their demands, decide to abduct Freia, goddess of youth, grower of the eternally rejuvenating apples — without her apples, the gods are soon going to die.

Wotan is at a loss, but then comes Loge, demigod of fire, with an idea: Alberich has recently stolen the Rhinegold, let's go down and steal it from him.

Meanwhile, Alberich has forged a magic ring out of the gold, which gives him absolute power over everything in the world — for a start, he has enslaved all his fellow Nibelungs, and has forced his brother Mime, a particularly gifted smith, to create a stealth helmet — it doesn't make you invisible, but it lets you take on any shape you want.

Enter Wotan and Loge, who are greeted by Alberich boasting about his powers.

The gods trick him, using the oldest trick in the book: after Alberich, to show off, has demonstrated how he can turn himself into a huge mighty dragon, they say, well, that's been quite impressive, but turning into something *small* would be much more difficult, wouldn't it, he surely couldn't do *that*? He *can*, he shows them, turning himself into a toad to prove it, and realizing too late that this had been a stupid move.

With Alberich bound, Wotan returns to the Valhalla building site, to negotiate a deal with the builders — Alberich is forced to have all the gold from the Rhine brought up by his slaves, and it happens that this makes up the exact amount of the ransom for Freia that the giants demand: a heap of gold large enough to cover her up. But no, a tiny bit is still missing, there is a gap in the heap, one of her eyes can still be seen through it — but, there is still the ring — Wotan has to surrender it — now the price is paid, and Freia is free again.

Alberich returns to his underground dwellings, beaten but not

defeated, and on his way out he curses the ring — to everyone who holds it, it shall bring woe and death. The curse works fast: Fasolt, who has the ring, gets slain by his brother, as they quarrel about how to split the treasure.

The gods enter Valhalla, except for Loge, the demigod, who refuses. From below, the Rhinemaidens' wailing is heard, they demand the gold back (or at least just the ring), so that harmony might be restored, but nobody pays them any attention.

(Note: Personally, I doubt Alberich's curse. By which power could he have cast it? I suspect that the ring never worked, that it's never been more than an empty symbol of something that doesn't even exist.)

DAY 1: THE VALKYRIE

(A long time later)

Act 1

A hut in the woods — with a strange piece of furniture, the trunk of a mighty ash tree right in the living room. A man enters and collapses on the floor, the girl who lives here gives him water to drink and dresses his wounds. He asks where he has come to and who she is, and she tells him, “this house, and this woman, are Hunding’s property.”

The two find that they are strangely attracted to each other. Soon Hunding comes home, not pleased to find his wife alone with a male stranger, but, unarmed and wounded, the stranger is entitled to his hospitality. Hunding asks his name, and he says he doesn’t have one. He then tells his life’s story: he has grown up in the woods, with his father, his mother and his twin sister, though mother and sister he had not known long — one day, when he and his father returned home from a hunt, they found their home burnt down, the mother slain, the sister gone. In the years that followed, he and his father lived as outcasts, always pursued by foes and enviers, until one day his father disappeared. After that, he had led a lonely life, everyone was hostile to him, every man he wanted to befriend and every woman he wanted to court turned him down and chased him away. Recently, he had been called to the defense of a maiden in distress — some family matter, involving an unwanted marriage — in the fight, after slaying a respectable number of foes, he was defeated, lost his sword, the maiden was slain, he had to flee, and here he was now, nameless and lost.

Hunding, unfortunately, had been involved in the same fight, but on the other side — for the night, he says to his guest, he will be safe, but next morning he should take a sword and defend himself like a man, for then he will slay him. He then harshly commands his wife to prepare him a nightcap and join him in the bedroom.

Our nameless hero, alone now, worries about the next day — where should he find a sword? Though he remembers, his father had once told him that, in the hour of greatest need, one would be ready for him, but where was it now?

Enters the girl, who has given Hunding a sleeping drink, so that they can talk undisturbed. You need a sword? You know, there *is* one, right here in the trunk of the ash-tree. At the wedding, into which she had been forced, a mysterious stranger had appeared, in a gray coat, his wide-brimmed hat drawn deep into his face, and he had stuck a sword into the trunk of this tree, and said it belonged to whoever would be able to pull it out. Many have tried since that day, but, of course, no one has ever been able to.

A bit more talking, and the two realize that a) they are in love with each other, b) that they are brother and sister, and c) that it had been their father who had brought that sword. So, everything is fine! She gives him a name, Siegmund (“Sieg” meaning victory), her own name is Sieglinde — Siegmund effortlessly pulls the sword out of the tree and names it Notung, they decide to run off, but first they make love.

Act 2

Wotan tells his beloved favorite Valkyrie daughter Brünnhilde to cover the forthcoming fight between Siegmund and Hunding, and to make sure that Siegmund will win.

Enters Fricka, Wotan's wife, goddess of matrimony, and she is furious. Adultery, *and* incest — she cannot allow this to go unpunished. Well, you know, Wotan says to her, that's life, I don't want to interfere.

Whom do you think you are fooling? Fricka asks. This bastard son of yours, he cannot get back the ring for you.

He can, Wotan says. *I* cannot, because I am bound by treaties, but someone who is *free*, not under my command, by his own free will can get the ring — that's been the idea all along.

Free, my ass, Fricka replies. He isn't free, it isn't his own will, you have set him up. *You* have created his misery, *you* have provided his sword, whatever you hope he will do has been by *your* design. Stop this outrageous nonsense, and let him be killed by Hunding, lest your wife and all the gods will be the laughing stock of all the world.

Wotan calls back Brünnhilde, and tells her he has changed his mind — not Hunding, but Siegmund has to fall. She is aghast, and so he explains to her some things: Fafner, the giant, has meanwhile transformed himself into a dragon, and lives in a cave where he guards the treasure that is now all his. Erda, the dark and wise Earth goddess, has predicted the downfall of the gods. To prevent this, he, Wotan, has sired the nine Valkyries, Brünnhilde herself being Erda's daughter, and given to them the task of bringing all fallen heroes to Valhalla, to assemble a formidable fighting force. But if Alberich ever gets the ring back, nothing will keep him from ruling the world. He, Wotan, cannot get back the ring from Fafner, as he is bound by his own word, so he had set out to sire a son, turn him into a hero, give him a good weapon, and let him do the job. But, Fricka is right, he says, this won't do, and as much as he wished it were different, Siegmund must die.

Brünnhilde, not interested in politics but knowing that Wotan truly

loves his son, at first refuses, but then accepts that she has to obey her father's commands.

Before the fight she visits Siegmund, to tell him she has come to take him to Valhalla, and what an honor this is, and what a great place Valhalla is. Yes, he will even see his father there, she says when he asks (not telling him who he is). But no, she replies to his next question, Sieglinde he will not see there. At that, Siegmund tells Brünnhilde to please give his regards to his father, but to Valhalla he will not go. And if he is to die now, then first he will kill the girl, rather than abandon her. Brünnhilde, moved by this display of love, decides to disobey her orders after all and to protect Siegmund, but at that moment Wotan himself shows up, smashes Siegmund's sword with his spear, and Hunding kills Siegmund.

Brünnhilde quickly takes Sieglinde and flees with her. Wotan commands Hunding to go to Fricka and report to her that things had happened as she had wished — *go, serf*, he says, killing him with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Act 3

Sieglinde wants to die, but Brünnhilde tells her that she has to live, because she carries Siegmund's son, who will grow up to be the greatest hero of all times, and his name has to be Siegfried. She also hands her the broken parts of the sword, and then tells her to run — she herself has now to face Wotan's wrath. And wrathful he is, even though Brünnhilde says she only did what she knew he had truly *wanted* her to do, contrary to what he had *ordered* her. But, punished she will be: dismissed from the ranks of the Valkyries, made mortal, and sent to sleep somewhere at the side of a road, for the first man to

find her to be her master. She is aghast, and finally Wotan, who still loves her, heeds her plea: no common man, at least, will be able to win her. She will sleep high up on a mountain ridge, surrounded by a wall of flames that only the noblest of heroes may overcome. Wotan kisses her, then with his spear he summons Loge, and the demigod himself is turned into the protective ring of fire. “He who fears the tip of my spear, shall never cross these flames,” Wotan says, before the curtain falls.

DAY 2: SIEGFRIED

Act 1

Again we are in a hut in the middle of the wood, only this time it is not simply a hut, but a smithy. Mime, the Nibelung, hunchbacked dwarf, Alberich's dispossessed brother, now an exile, is the smith. He has a young apprentice — many years ago, he had taken in a straying pregnant woman, who soon afterwards had died in childbed. He knows nothing about her, just that she had said that her son's name should be Siegfried. Her only possession had been a broken sword, the parts of which, whatever he had tried, despite all his skills, he had never been able to weld together.

Mime and Siegfried hate each other. Siegfried is a conceited brutish oaf, and Mime a scheming scoundrel, who has raised Siegfried only so that he would slay Fafner one day, letting Mime himself lay his hands on the treasure. And now Siegfried, grown to manhood, succeeds where Mime always had failed: he forges the sword Notung anew.

Siegfried, proud of his strength and thinking he is the greatest (well, he *is*), is told by Mime that there is one thing he doesn't know: fear. Siegfried is eager to learn it, and Mime suggests they go visit a dragon — there Siegfried can learn what fear is.

Act 2

He doesn't learn it, though, he just slays the dragon. Dying, Fafner asks him why — Siegfried shrugs, he hadn't had anything against him,

it had just seemed a good idea. He looks through the hoard, and again he shrugs — what does he need all that stuff for? Licking the dragon's blood from his finger makes him understand the birds' talk. A bird tells him to take at least the helmet and the ring, and, indifferently, he does.

Mime offers him a drink of refreshment — because of the dragon's blood Siegfried can hear Mime's thoughts, and hears that he is about to poison him — disgusted, but without too much emotion, he slays him, then he throws Mime's and Fafner's bodies into the treasure cave and seals it with a large boulder.

He doesn't really know what to do now, and again the bird speaks, and tells him about a woman, surrounded by fire, whom he should go and visit. Siegfried has no idea what a woman might be, but maybe he can learn that fear from her, which the dragon had not been able to teach him? Curious, he sallies forth.

Act 3

Wotan, who doesn't go by the name of Wotan anymore but calls himself the Wanderer, summons Erda, to ask her advice.

Erda has no advice to give him — to the contrary, when Wotan tells her how he has punished their daughter, she is disgusted, and tells him to go to hell.

This, metaphorically, is what he wants to do anyway. He doesn't fear the end of the gods, nor his own end, anymore — he longs for it. But not before he has made Siegfried, his grandson, his heir — with Brünnhilde at his side, he hopes, Siegfried will redeem the world. Only, he is still an ignorant lout, without the slightest idea of what is going on, and needs to be taught a few things before he'll be ready for the task.

So, on the path that leads up to Brünnhilde's ridge, Wotan waits for Siegfried. Siegfried comes along and sees an old man standing in his way. Step aside, old man, he says. Wotan tries to involve him in a discussion and asks him a few clever questions that are meant to make him start thinking, but thinking is not Siegfried's strong point, and he only gets more and more angry at this babbling doter.

Wotan now starts to have second thoughts on whether this nitwit might really be the right person to rule the world, and he raises his spear to block Siegfried's path. Siegfried, slightly puzzled by this old man's folly, raises Notung, cuts the spear in pieces, and marches on.

He, who had not feared Wotan's spear, now walks through the fire, finds an armored unconscious person, removes the armor, and is aghast to see: "this is not a man!" Remember, he hadn't known what "woman" meant. Now at last, confronted with a woman, he shakes with fear.

But, he soon gets over it, Brünnhilde wakes up, they fall in love, and soon they make love. (Another incestuous relationship, by the way, as she is his half-aunt.)

And they could have lived happily ever after, but, they didn't.

DAY 3: TWILIGHT OF THE GODS

Act 1

Siegfried is bored, he is a hero after all, he wants to go out into the world to enjoy some adventures. Brünnhilde stays home on her ridge, but she lends him her horse Grane. He gives her the ring, as a token of his love — to them, it's just a piece of jewelry.

Siegfried arrives at the court of Gunther, where he lives with his sister Gutrune and his half-brother Hagen. Hagen, though, is the son of Alberich, whom (never mind he had forsworn love) he had sired to have a helper in his quest to recapture the ring — of this, everyone else is unaware.

Hagen makes Gutrune, who is on the lookout for a handsome husband, give Siegfried an amnesia-inducing love potion. Siegfried immediately forgets all about Brünnhilde, and decides to marry Gutrune.

Gutrune, though, cannot marry before her elder brother does, so Gunther needs a wife. He has heard about Brünnhilde and the wall of fire, and is intrigued, but doesn't dare to try it and risk his life. No problem, Siegfried says, we are family now, I'll do it for you.

Interlude: Brünnhilde gets a visit from her Valkyrie sister Waltraute, who tells her that Wotan has returned home with a broken spear, has felled the World Ash Tree, cut it into pieces, piled them up around Valhalla as firewood, and is sitting and waiting for the end. She pleads with Brünnhilde to give the ring back to the Rhinemaidens, but to Brünnhilde the ring has no metaphysical meaning — it is a reminder of Siegfried's love, and she won't part with it, no way.

Back to the main story: Gunther and Siegfried arrive at Brünnhilde's mountain ridge, Siegfried uses the stealth helmet to disguise himself as Gunther, in this guise overpowers and rapes Brünnhilde whom he does not remember to have ever seen before, and takes the ring from her. Then the real Gunther, her alleged conqueror, takes Brünnhilde home.

Act 2

Arriving at Gunther's castle, Brünnhilde is shocked to find Siegfried engaged to another woman, and acting like a total stranger towards her. Equally puzzled is she to see the ring, which supposedly Gunther had taken from her, on Siegfried's finger. She loudly accuses Siegfried of betrayal, Guttrune voices her doubts, Siegfried asserts his innocence, and everyone is quite confused — except Hagen, of course, who has arranged the whole thing, but who naturally keeps quiet.

And Hagen seizes the opportunity. While Siegfried is alive he can't get the ring from him, but once he is dead ... He convinces Gunther that Siegfried cannot be trusted — obviously he has had a previous affair with Gunther's woman, and has lied about it? — and, together with the furious Brünnhilde, they agree upon Siegfried's death.

Act 3

Siegfried, Gunther and Hagen go on a hunt. Siegfried, having lost his way for a while, comes to the shore of the Rhine, where the Rheinmaidens plead with him that he should give them the ring. He almost does, they are pretty girls nicely asking him for a small favor, but then they make the mistake of bringing up the argument that he will die

this very day if he doesn't. His heroism insulted, he laughs at such typically empty female threats, and walks off.

When Siegfried meets up with the other two men and they sit around a camp-fire, Hagen, before he kills him, gives him an anti-dote — Siegfried remembers, and dies with Brünnhilde's name on his lips.

Back at the castle, Guttrune faints as her slain husband is carried in on a bier. Hagen claims the ring, Gunther objects, Hagen kills him, reaches for the ring on Siegfried's finger, but the dead man's arm rises, and Hagen shrinks back in horror.

Enters Brünnhilde, who had been to the Rhine, and had had a long talk with the Rhinemaidens — finally, though too late, she understands everything.

She takes the ring, tells Wotan's ravens, who had just shown up, to fly home and bring the long-awaited tidings to their master, then she orders a funeral pyre to be built for Siegfried, and when it burns high, on her horse Grane she rides into the flames.

When the fire has burned down, the Rhine overflows in a huge tide, the Rhinemaidens joyously pick up the ring from the ashes, Hagen jumps after them, the maidens drown him, the castle crumbles, and on the distant horizon Valhalla is seen bursting into flames.

From the ruins of the castle, men and women watch in awe.