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SHUMWAY'S
The Nibelungenlied

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The Riverside Literature Series

THE NIBELUNGENLIED

TRANSLATED FROM
THE MIDDLE HIGH GERMAN
WITH AN INTRODUCTORY
SKETCH AND NOTES

BY

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PREFACE

THIS translation has been undertaken in the belief that so important an epic as the *Nibelungenlied* should be represented in The Riverside Literature Series. Prose has been selected as the medium of translation, since it is hardly possible to give an accurate rendering and at the same time to meet the demands imposed by rhyme and metre: at least, none of the verse translations made thus far have succeeded in doing this. The prose translations, on the other hand, mostly err in being too continuous and in condensing too much, so that they retell the story instead of translating it. The present translator has tried to avoid these two extremes. He has endeavored to translate literally and accurately, and to reproduce the spirit of the original, as far as a prose translation will permit. To this end the language has been made as simple and as Saxon in character as possible. An exception has been made, however, in the case of such Romance words as were in use in England during the age of the romances of chivalry, and which would help to lend a Romance coloring; these have been frequently employed. Very few obsolete words have been used, and these are explained in the notes, but the language has been made to some extent archaic, especially in dialogue, in order to give the impression of age. The Introductory Sketch has been made quite complete and frequent references to authorities have been introduced to meet the needs of the advanced student. These authorities are listed at the close of the

Introduction, with the page and line references indicated. A short list of English works on the subject has also been added.

In conclusion the translator would like to thank his colleagues, C. G. Child and Cornelius Weygandt, for their helpful suggestions in starting the work, and also to acknowledge his indebtedness to the German edition of Paul Piper, especially in preparing the notes.

DANIEL BUSSIER SHUMWAY.

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INTRODUCTORY SKETCH

THERE is probably no poem of German literature that has excited such universal interest, or that has been so much studied and discussed, as the *Nibelungenlied*. In its present form it is a product of the age of chivalry, but it reaches back to the earliest epochs of German antiquity, and embraces not only the pageantry of courtly chivalry, but also traits of ancient Germanic folklore and probably of Teutonic mythology. One of its earliest critics fitly called it a German Iliad, for, like this great Greek epic, it goes back to the remotest times and unites the monumental fragments of half-forgotten myths and historical personages into a poem that is essentially national in character, and the embodiment of all that is great in the antiquity of the race. Though lacking to some extent the dignity of the Iliad, the *Nibelungenlied* surpasses the former in the deep tragedy which pervades it, the tragedy of fate, the inevitable retribution for crime, the never-dying struggle between the powers of good and evil, between light and darkness.

That the poem must have been exceedingly popular during the Middle Ages is evinced by the great number of Manuscripts that have come down to us. We possess in all twenty-eight more or less complete MSS., preserved in thirty-one fragments, fifteen of which date from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Of all these MSS., but nine are so well preserved that, in spite of some minor breaks, they can be considered

complete. Of this number three, designated respectively as A, B, C, are looked upon as the most important for purposes of textual criticism, and around them a fierce battle has been waged, which is not even yet settled.¹ It is now generally conceded that the longest MS., C, is a later redaction with many additional strophes, but opinions are divided as to whether the priority should be given to A or B, the probabilities being that B is the more original, A merely a careless copy of B.

In spite of the great popularity of the *Nibelungenlied*, the poem was soon forgotten by the mass of the people. With the decay of courtly chivalry and the rise of the prosperous citizen class, whose ideals and tastes lay in a different direction, this epic shared the fate of many others of its kind, and was relegated to the dusty shelves of monastery or ducal libraries, there to wait till a more cultured age, curious as to the literature of its ancestors, should bring it forth from its hiding places. However, the figures of the old legend were not forgotten, but lived on among the people, and were finally embodied in a popular ballad, *Das Lied vom Hürnen Seyfrid*, which has been preserved in a print of the sixteenth century, although the poem itself is thought to go back at least to the thirteenth. The legend was also dramatized by Hans Sachs, the shoe-

¹ A is a parchment MS. of the second half of the thirteenth century, now found in Munich. It forms the basis of Lachmann's edition. B is a parchment MS. of the middle of the thirteenth century, belonging to the monastery of St. Gall. It has been edited by Bartsch, *Deutsche Klassiker des Mittelalters*, vol. 3, and by Piper, *Deutsche National-Literatur*, vol. 6. C is a parchment MS., of the thirteenth century, now in the ducal library of Donaueschingen. It is the best written of all the MSS., and has been edited by Zarneke.

maker poet of Nuremberg, and related in prose form in a chap book which still exists in prints of the eighteenth century. The story and the characters gradually became so vague and distorted, that only a trained eye could detect in the burlesque figures of the popular account the heroes of the ancient Germanic Legend.

The honor of rediscovering the *Nibelungenlied* and of restoring it to the world of literature belongs to a young physician by the name of J. H. Obereit, who found the manuscript C at the castle of Hohenems in the Tirol on June 29, 1755 ; but the scientific study of the poem begins with Karl Lachmann, one of the keenest philological critics that Germany has ever produced. In 1816 he read before the University of Berlin his epoch-making essay upon the original form of the *Nibelungenlied*. Believing that the poem was made up of a number of distinct ballads or lays, he sought by means of certain criteria to eliminate all parts which were, as he thought, later interpolations or emendations. As a result of this sifting and discarding process, he reduced the poem to what he considered to have been its original form, namely, twenty separate lays, which he thought had come down to us in practically the same form in which they had been sung by various minstrels.

This view is no longer held in its original form. Though we have every reason to believe that ballads of Siegfried the dragon killer, of Siegfried and Kriemhild, and of the destruction of the Nibelungs existed in Germany, yet these ballads are no longer to be seen in our poem. They formed merely the basis or source for some poet who thought to revive the old

heroic legends of the German past which were familiar to his hearers and, to adapt them to the tastes of his time. In all probability we must assume two, three, or even more steps in the genesis of the poem. There appear to have been two different sources, one a Low German account, quite simple and brief, the other a tradition of the Lower Rhine. The legend was perhaps developed by minstrels along the Rhine, until it was taken and worked up into its present form by some Austrian poet. Who this poet was we do not know, but we do know that he was perfectly familiar with all the details of courtly etiquette. He seems also to have been acquainted with the courtly epics of Heinrich von Veldeke and Hartman von Ouwe, but his poem is free from the tedious and often exaggerated descriptions of pomp, dress, and court ceremonies, that mar the beauty of even the best of the courtly epics. Many painstaking attempts have been made to discover the identity of the writer of our poem, but even the most plausible of all these theories which considers Kürenberg, one of the earliest of the *Minnesingers*, to be the author, because of the similarity of the strophic form of our poem to that used by him, is not capable of absolute proof, and recent investigations go to show that Kürenberg was indebted to the *Nibelungen* strophe for the form of his lyric, and not the *Nibelungenlied* to him. The *Nibelungen* strophe is presumably much older, and, having become popular in Austria through the poem, was adopted by Kürenberg for his purposes. As to the date of the poem, in its present form it cannot go back further than about 1190, because of the exactness of the rhymes, nor

could it have been written later than 1204, because of certain allusions to it in the sixth book of *Parzival*, which we know to have been written at this date. The two Low German poems which probably form the basis of our epic may have been united about 1150. It was revised and translated into High German and circulated at South German courts about 1170, and then received its present courtly form about 1190, this last version being the immediate source of our manuscripts.

The story of Siegfried, his tragic death, and the dire vengeance visited upon his slayers, which lies at the basis of our poem, antedates the latter by many centuries, and was known to all nations whose languages prove by their resemblance to the German tongue their original identity with the German people. Not only along the banks of the Rhine and the Danube and upon the upland plains of Southern Germany, but also along the rocky fjords of Norway, among the Angles and Saxons in their new home across the channel, even in the distant Shetland Islands and on the snow-covered wastes of Iceland, this story was told around the fires at night and sung to the harp in the banqueting halls of kings and nobles, each people and each generation telling it in its own fashion and adding new elements of its own invention. This great geographical distribution of the legend, and the variety of forms in which it appears, make it difficult to know where we must seek its origin. The northern version is in many respects older and simpler in form than the German, but still it is probable that Norway was not the home of the saga, but that it took its rise in Germany along the banks of the Rhine among the ancient tribe of the

Franks, as is shown by the many geographical names that are reminiscent of the characters of the story, such as a Siegfried *spring* in the Odenwald, a Hagen *well* at Lorsch, a Brunhild *bed* near Frankfort, and the well-known *Drachenfels*, or Dragon's Rock, on the Rhine. It is to Norway, however, that we must go for our knowledge of the story, for, singularly enough, with the exception of the *Nibelungenlied* and the popular ballad, German literature has preserved almost no trace of the legend, and such as exist are too late and too corrupt to be of much use in determining the original features of the story.

Just when the legend emigrated to Skandinavia we do not know, but certainly at an early date, perhaps during the opening years of the sixth century. It may have been introduced by German traders, by slaves captured by the Northmen on their frequent marauding expeditions, or, as Mogk believes, may have been taken by the Heruli on their return to Norway after their defeat by the Langobardi. By whatever channel, however, the story reached the North, it became part and parcel of Skandinavian folklore, only certain names still pointing to the original home of the legend. In the ninth century, when Harald Harfagr changed the ancient free constitution of the land, many Norwegians emigrated to Iceland, taking with them these acquired legends, which were better preserved in this remote island because of the peaceful introduction of Christianity, than on the Continent, where the Church was more antagonistic to the customs and legends of the heathen period.

The Skandinavian version of the Siegfried legend

has been handed down to us in five different forms. The first of these is the poetic or older *Edda*, also called Saemund's *Edda*, as it was assigned to the celebrated Icelandic scholar Saemundr Sigfusson. The *Codex Regius*, in which it is preserved, dates from the middle of the thirteenth century, but is probably a copy of an older manuscript. The songs it contains were written at various times, the oldest probably in the first half of the ninth century, the latest not much before the date of the earliest manuscript. Most of them, however, belong to the Viking period, when Christianity was already beginning to influence the Norwegians, that is, between the years 800 and 1000. They are partly heroic, partly mythological in character, and are written in alliterative strophes interspersed with prose, and have the form of dialogues. Though the legends on which these songs are based were brought from Norway, most of them were probably composed in Iceland. Among these songs, now, we find a number which deal with the adventures of Siegfried and his tragic end.

The second source of the Siegfried story is the so-called *Völsungasaga*, a prose paraphrase of the *Edda* songs. The MS. dates from the beginning of the thirteenth century, but the account was probably written a century earlier. The adventures of Siegfried and his ancestors are here related in great detail and his ancestry traced back to Wodan. Although a secondary source, as it is based on the *Edda*, the *Völsungasaga* is nevertheless of great importance, since it supplies a portion of the *Codex Regius* which has been lost, and thus furnishes us with the contents of the missing songs.

The third source is the prose Edda, sometimes called the *Snorra Edda*, after the famous Iclander Snorri Sturluson (1178-1241), to whom it was ascribed. The author was acquainted with both the poetic Edda and the *Völsungasaga*, and follows these accounts closely. The younger Edda is not really a tale, but a book of poetics; it relates, however, the Siegfried saga briefly. It is considered an original source, since it evidently made use of songs that have not come down to us, especially in the account of the origin of the treasure, which is here told more in detail and with considerable differences. The *Nornagestsaga* or *Nornageststhattr*, the story of *Nornagest*, forms the fourth source of the Siegfried story. It is really a part of the Olaf saga, but contains the story of Sigurd and Gunnar (the Norse forms of Siegfried and Gunther), which an old man Nornagest relates to King Olaf Tryggvason, who converted the Norwegians to Christianity. The story was written about 1250 to illustrate the transition from heathendom to the Christian faith. It is based on the Edda and the *Völsungasaga*, and is therefore of minor importance as a source.

These four sources represent the early introduction of the Siegfried legend into Skandinavia. A second introduction took place about the middle of the thirteenth century, at the time of the flourishing of the Hanseatic League, when the story was introduced together with other popular German epics. These poems are products of the age of chivalry, and are characterized by the romantic and courtly features of this movement. The one which concerns us here, as the fifth source of the Siegfried story, is the so-called *Thidrek-*

saga, which celebrates the adventures of the famous legendary hero, Dietrich of Berne, the historical Theodorich of Ravenna. In as far as it contains the adventures of the Nibelungs, it is also called the *Niflungasaga*. The *Thidreksaga* was written about 1250 by a Norwegian who, as he himself tells us, heard the story from Germans in the neighborhood of Bremen and Münster. Since it is thus based on Saxon traditions, it can be considered an independent source of the legend, and, in fact, differs from the earlier Norse versions in many important details. The author was acquainted, however, with the older versions, and sought to compromise between them, but mostly followed his German authorities.

The story, as given in the older Norse versions, is in most respects more original than in the *Nibelungenlied*. It relates the history of the treasure of the Nibelungs, tracing it back to a giant by the name of *Hreithmar*, who received it from the god *Loki* as a compensation for the killing of the former's son *Otur*, whom *Loki* had slain in the form of an otter. *Loki* obtained the ransom from a dwarf named *Andwari*, who in turn had stolen it from the river gods of the Rhine. *Andwari* pronounces a terrible curse upon the treasure and its possessors, and this curse passes from *Loki* to the Giant *Hreithmar*, who is murdered when asleep by his two sons *Fafnir* and *Regin*. The latter, however, is cheated out of the coveted prize by *Fafnir*, who carries it away to the *Gnita* heath, where he guards it in the form of a dragon.

This treasure, with its accompanying curse, next passes into the hands of a human being named *Sigurd*

(the Norse form of Siegfried, as we have seen), a descendant of the race of the Völsungs, who trace their history back to Wodan and are especially favored by him. The full story of Siegfried's ancestry is far too long to relate here, and does not especially concern us, as it has little or no influence on the later development of the story. It is sufficient for our purpose to know that Siegfried was the son of Siegmund, who was slain in battle before the birth of his son. Sigurd was carefully reared by his mother *Hjördis* and the wise dwarf Regin, who taught him the knowledge of runes and of many languages.¹ At the suggestion of Regin, Sigurd asks for and receives the steed *Grani* from the king, and is then urged by his tutor to help him obtain the treasure guarded by the latter's brother Fafnir. Sigurd promises, but first demands a sword. Two, that are given him by Regin, prove worthless, and he forges a new one from the pieces of his father's sword, which his mother had preserved. With this he easily splits the anvil and cuts in two a flake of wool, floating down the Rhine. He first avenges the death of his father, and then sets off with Regin to attack the dragon Fafnir. At the advice of the former Sigurd digs a ditch across the dragon's path and pierces him from below with his sword, as the latter comes down to drink. In dying the dragon warns Sigurd against the treasure and its curse, and against Regin, who, he says, is planning

¹ The *Thidreksaga* differs from the other Norse versions in having *Sigfröd*, as he is called here, brought up in ignorance of his parents, a trait which was probably borrowed from the widespread *Genoveva* story, although thought by some to have been an original feature of our legend.

Sigurd's death, intending to obtain the treasure for himself.

When Regin sees the dragon safely dead, he creeps from his place of concealment, drinks of the blood, and, cutting out the heart, begs Sigurd to roast it for him. While doing so, Sigurd burns his fingers, and, putting them in his mouth, understands at once the language of the birds and hears them say that Sigurd himself should eat the heart and then he would be wiser than all other men. They also betray Regin's evil designs, and counsel the lad to kill his tutor. This Sigurd then does, cutting off Regin's head, drinking the blood of both brothers, and eating Fafnir's heart.¹ On the further advice of the birds Sigurd first fetches the treasure from the cave, and then journeys to the mountain *Hindarfjall*, where he rescues the sleeping Valkyrie, *Sigrdrifa* (*Brynhild*, *Brunhild*), who, stung by the sleep thorn of Wodan, and clad in full armor, lies asleep within a castle that is surrounded by a wall of flame. With the help of his steed Grani, Sigurd succeeds in penetrating through the fire to the castle. The sleeping maiden awakes when he cuts the armor from her with his sword, for it was as tight as if grown fast to the flesh. She hails her deliverer with

¹ The *Thidreksaga*, which has forgotten the enmity of the brothers, and calls Sigurd's tutor *Mimr*, tells the episode in somewhat different fashion. The brothers plan to kill Sigurd, and the latter is attacked by the dragon, while burning charcoal in the forest. After killing the monster with a firebrand, Sigurd bathes himself in the blood and thus become covered with a horny skin, which renders him invulnerable, save in one place between the shoulder blades, which he could not reach. This bathing in the blood is also related in the Seyfrid ballad and in the *Nibelungenlied*, with the difference, that the vulnerable spot is caused by a linden leaf falling upon him.

great joy, for she had vowed never to marry a man who knew fear. At Sigurd's request she teaches him many wise precepts, and finally pledges her troth to him. He then departs, after promising to be faithful to her and to remember her teachings.

On his journeyings Sigurd soon arrives at the court of *Giuki* (the Norse form of the German *Gibicho*, *Gibich*), a king whose court lay on the lower Rhine. Giuki has three sons, *Gunnar*, *Högni*, and *Gutthorm*, and a daughter *Gudrun*, endowed with great beauty. The queen bears the name of Grimhild, and is versed in magic, but possessed of an evil heart.¹ Sigurd is received with great honor, for his coming had been announced to Gudrun in dreams, which had in part been interpreted to her by Brynhild. The mother, knowing of Sigurd's relations to the latter, gives him a potion which produces forgetfulness, so that he no longer remembers his betrothed, and accepts the hand of Gudrun, which the king offers him at the queen's request. The marriage is celebrated with great pomp, and Sigurd remains permanently attached to Giuki's court, performing with the others many deeds of valor.

Meanwhile Grimhild urges her son Gunnar to sue for the hand of Brynhild. Taking with him Sigurd and a few others, Gunnar visits first Brynhild's father *Budli*, and then her brother-in-law *Heimir*, from both of whom he learns that she is free to choose whom she

¹ The fact that all but one of these names alliterate, shows that the Norse version is here more original. Gunnar is the same as Gunther (Gundaharius), Högni as Hagen; Gutthorm (Godomar) appears in the German version as Gernot. In this latter the father is called Dancrat, the mother Uote, and the name Grimhild is transferred from the mother to the daughter.

will, but that she will marry no one who has not ridden through the wall of flame. With this answer they proceed to Brynhild's castle, where Gunnar is unable to pierce the flames, even when seated on Sigurd's steed. Finally Sigurd and Gunnar change forms, and Sigurd, disguised as Gunnar, rides through the wall of fire, announces himself to Brynhild as Gunnar, the son of Giuki, and reminds her of her promise to marry the one who penetrated the fire. Brynhild consents with great reluctance, for she is busy carrying on a war with a neighboring king. Sigurd then passes three nights at her side, placing, however, his sword *Gram* between them, as a bar of separation. At parting he draws from her finger the ring, with which he had originally pledged his troth to her, and replaces it with another, taken from Fafnir's hoard. Soon after this the marriage of Gunnar and Brynhild is celebrated with great splendor, and all return to Giuki's court, where they live happily for some time.

One day, however, when the ladies go down to the river to take a bath, Brynhild will not bathe further down stream than Gudrun, that is, in the water which flows from Gudrun to her,¹ giving as the reason, that her father was mightier and her husband braver, since he had ridden through the fire, while Sigurd had been a menial. Stung at this, Gudrun retorts that not Gunnar but Sigurd had penetrated the flames and had taken from her the fateful ring *Andvaranaut*, which she then shows to her rival in proof of her assertion. Brynhild turns deathly pale, but answers not a word. After a second conversation on the subject had

¹ In the prose Edda, in the water which drips from Gudrun's hair.