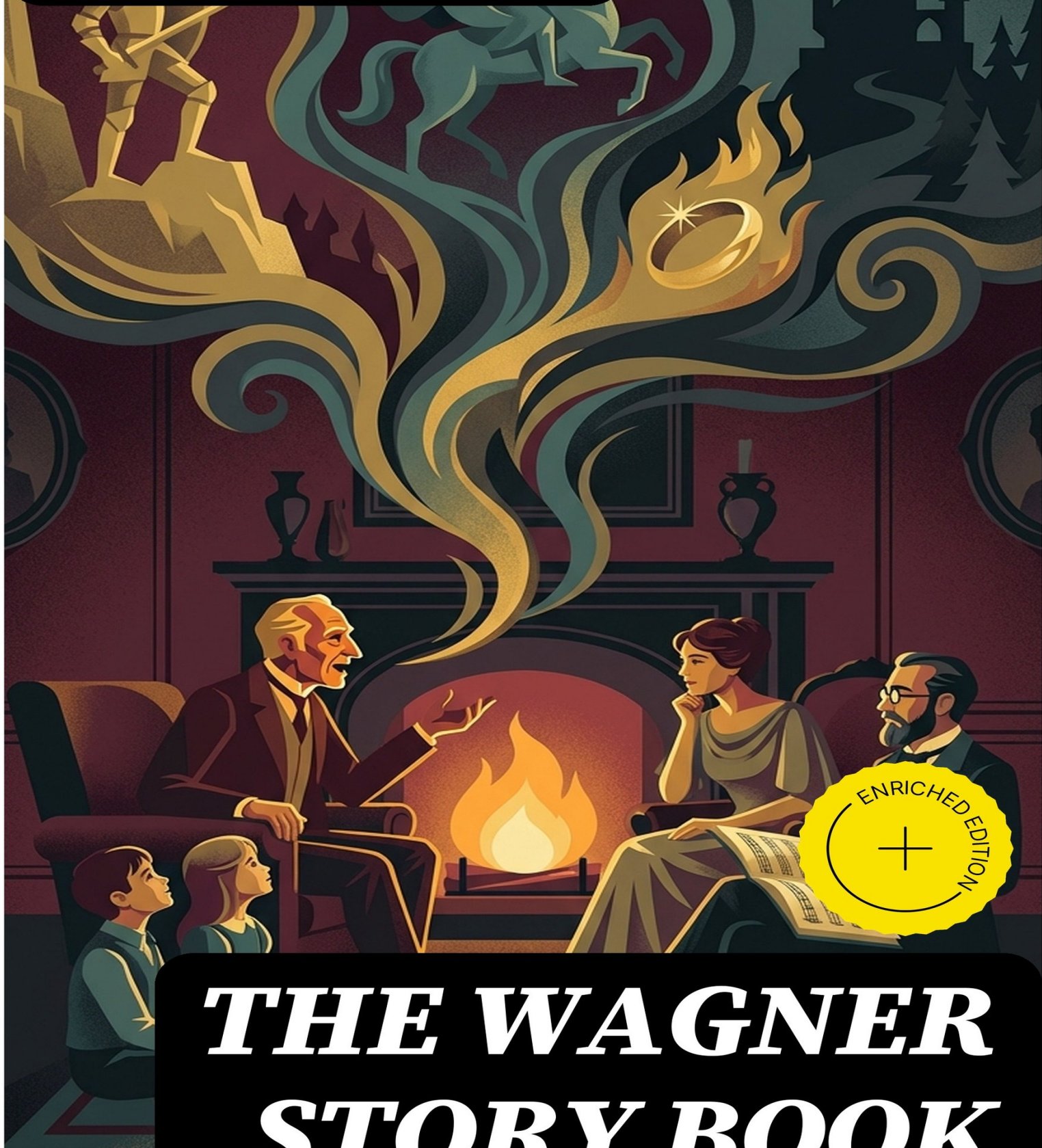


***WILLIAM
HENRY FROST***



***THE WAGNER
STORY BOOK***

William Henry Frost

The Wagner Story Book

Enriched edition. Firelight Tales of the Great Music Dramas

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Trevor Grimm

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THE STOLEN TREASURE

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There is a certain little girl who sometimes tries to find out when I am not over busy, so that she may ask me to tell her a story. She is kind enough to say that she likes my stories, and this so flatters my vanity that I like nothing better than telling them to her. One reason why she likes them, I suspect, is that they are not really my stories at all, the most of them. They are the stories that the whole world

has known and loved all these hundreds and thousands of years, tales of the gods and the heroes, of the giants and the goblins. Those are the right stories to tell to children, I believe, and the right ones for children to hear—the wonderful things that used to be done, up in the sky, and down under the ocean, and inside the mountains. If the boys and girls do not find out now, while they are young, all about the strange, mysterious, magical life of the days when the whole world was young, it is ten to one that they will never find out about it at all, for the most of us do not keep ourselves like children always, though surely we have all been told plainly enough that that is what we ought to do.

This little girl's mother is rather a strange sort of woman. I do not know that she exactly disagrees with us about these stories that we both like so much, but she seems to have a different way of looking at them from ours. I sometimes suspect that she does not even believe in fairies at all, that she never so much as thought she saw a ghost, that, if she heard a dozen wild horses galloping over the roof of the house and then flying away into the sky, she would think it was only the wind, and that she is no more afraid of ogres than of policemen. Still she is a woman whom one cannot help liking, in some respects.

But one day she said something to the little girl that surprised me, and made me think that perhaps I had done her injustice. The child came to me with a face full of perplexity and said: "What do you suppose mamma just told me?"

"I am sure I can't guess," I replied; "your mother tells you such ridiculous things that I am always afraid to think what

will be the next. Perhaps she says that William Tell didn't shoot an apple off his little boy's head, or that the baker's wife didn't box King Alfred's ears for letting the cakes burn."

"Oh, no," said the child, "it isn't a bit like that; she says that you can see pictures in the fire sometimes—men and horses and trees and all kinds of things."

"Does she, indeed? And how does your mother know what I can see in the fire or what I can't see?"

"Oh, I don't mean just you—yourself, I mean anybody. Now can you? I mean can anybody?"

"Why, yes, if that is what you mean; I think some people can. It is the most sensible thing I have known your mother to say in a long time."

"But how can anybody see such things? Can you see them? I have been looking at the fire ever so long, and I can't see anything at all but just the fire, the wood, and the ashes."

"Let us look at it together," I said; and I put a chair that was big enough to hold both of us before the fireplace. "Just see how bright the fire is; look down into those deep places under the sticks, and see how it glows and shines like melted gold. Now, you know when you look into a mirror you can see pictures of the things in front of it—your own face, the walls of the room, the furniture. That is because the mirror is so bright that it reflects these things; yet the mirror is not bright enough to reflect anything except what is there before it, such things as you can see with your eyes and touch with your hands. But the fire can do better than that, for it is a great deal brighter than the mirror, and it is so bright that it can reflect thoughts. So you must think of the

pictures first, and then, if you know just how to look for them in the fire, you will find them reflected there, and after a little while you will be surprised at the wonderful things you will see."

"I don't know what you mean at all," said the child; "tell me what you can see in the fire now."

"Very well. Suppose, then, first, that you almost close your eyes, but not quite, so that you will not see the fire so plainly, and it will all run together and look dim and misty. When I look at it in that way it seems to me to be fire no more, but water. It is as if we were down under a broad, deep river, and could see all the mass of water slowly eddying and whirling and flowing on above us, with just the little glow and glimmer of brightness that come down from the daylight and the air above. But there is one little spot that is brighter, right in the middle of the fire, where you see that one little yellow flame all by itself[2q]. In my picture, it is like a big lump of pure gold, resting on a point of rock that stands straight up from the bottom of the river. It is really gold, and magic gold at that[3q], for you know wonderful treasures often lie at the bottoms of rivers. One of the wonderful things about this gold is that, if anybody could have a ring made of it, he could compel everybody else to obey him and serve him, and could rule the whole world.

"Three forms I can see now moving backward and forward, and up and down, and around and around about the gold. Now they grow a little clearer. They are river nymphs, or something of the sort, and they are here to guard the gold, lest anybody should try to steal it. It would not be easy to steal, even if it had no guard, and knowing

this has perhaps made these pretty keepers a little careless about it, so that now, instead of watching it very closely, they are swimming and diving and circling about, trying to catch one another, having the jolliest time in the world, and never thinking that there may be danger near."

"And you can see all those things in the fire?" said the little girl.

"I can't see any of them. How do you see them?"

"Just as I told you at first, by thinking of them and then seeing the thoughts reflected there."

"Well, tell me some more."

"Look at that little dark spot under the fire. When I look at it in the way I have told you, it is the form of a dwarf. He is ugly and rough-looking, he is crooked, and he has a wicked face. He slips and tumbles slowly along, till he catches sight of the water nymphs, and they look so pretty and graceful and happy, as they chase one another about and up and down and around, that his cruel little eyes light up with pleasure, and he calls to them that he should like to come up and play with them too."

"Oh, now I don't believe any of it at all," said the child; "I thought just for a little while you might know how to see all those funny things in the fire, but you can't hear people talk in the fire."

"Oh, my dear child, you don't know very much about the fire if you think I can't see anything I want to in it, or hear anything I want to either. I tell you I can hear what this dwarf says, just as plainly as I can see him walk about. Still, if you don't believe any of it and don't care to know about the dwarf and the nymphs and the gold, perhaps you might

better go and study your multiplication table, and I will find something else to do."

"Oh, but I do want to know about them. Please tell me some more. What do the nymphs say to the dwarf? Can you hear that too?"

"Of course I can hear it; they call to him to come up and play with them if he likes, and he clammers up over the rocks and trees to catch one of them after another, while they swim and glide away from him, and find it much better fun than chasing one another. It is good fun, no doubt, for the dwarf cannot swim like them, but only scrambles about in the most ridiculous way, with never any hope of catching one of them, except when she lets him come near her for a moment, to plague him by slipping away again quite out of his reach. At last he gets thoroughly tired and discouraged and angry, while the three sisters laugh at him and taunt him and chatter with one another, and have clearly enough forgotten all about the gold that they are supposed to be watching.

"But see now how much brighter the fire is getting. It makes me think that something must have happened up above the river. The sun must have risen, or something of that sort, for everything looks clearer and the gold shines out so bright and beautiful, that the blear-eyed dwarf himself sees it and forgets all about trying to catch water nymphs in wondering what it is. He asks the nymphs, and they tell him about the ring that could be made of it if only it could be stolen from them; but it is of no use for him to try, they say, because it is a part of the magic of the gold that it can never be stolen except by some one who loves nobody

in the world and has sworn that he will never love anybody, and it is clear enough that the dwarf is in love with all three of them at this very minute. When such a strange treasure as this was to be guarded, it was no doubt very clever to set three such beautiful creatures as these to watch it, for if a thief were not in love already, it is a hundred to one that he would be before he got near enough to the gold to steal it.

"But the nymphs do not understand at all how much more a heartless little monster like this dwarf loves the glitter of gold than he could ever possibly love them. So, even while they are laughing at him, he is forgetting them completely, and then he swears a deep oath that as long as he lives he will never love any living thing. Now, if you can think of anything that anybody could do more wicked, more horrible, more cruel than that, you must know a great deal more about wicked and horrible things than you have any right to know. After that every kind of wrong is easy, and a little thing like stealing a lump of gold of the size of a bushel basket is a mere nothing. The dwarf scrambles up the point of rock again, while the nymphs, who think that he is still chasing them, swim far away from him, and he seizes the gold and plunges down to the bottom with it. The nymphs rush together again with a cry of horror and grief and fright, and in an instant everything is dark, as the flames of our fire suddenly drop down.

[Illustration: "THE GOLD SHINES OUT SO BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL."]

"But you see they fall only for a moment, and now, as they blaze up again, brighter than ever, I see another picture. It is on the hilltop above the river. The grass there is

soft and fresh, the trees are cool and green, and the mellow light of morning is over them all. A light, white morning mist comes up from the river, and the sun, which has just risen from behind the purple hills, away off where the sky touches them, turns the mist into shifting and shimmering silver, so that it makes the whole scene look brighter instead of dimmer. On the hill across the river is a glorious sight. It is a castle, the grandest and most beautiful you ever saw. Its walls are thick and strong enough for a fortress, yet its towers and battlements look so light and graceful that you would think they might hold themselves up there in the air, or rest on the silver river mist, if there were no walls under them. As I look at the castle through the mist it seems half clear and solid and firm, and half wavering and dim, mysterious and magical, like a castle in a dream.

"There is something magical about it, for it was all built in one night by two giants, and they built it for the gods themselves. And now you must be prepared to meet some very fine company, for right here before us are the great Father and the great Mother of the gods, looking across the river at their splendid new home."

"Do you mean Jupiter and Juno?" the little girl asked.

"No, these are not Jupiter and Juno; and the other gods whom we shall see soon, if the fire burns right, are not the gods you know already, but they are a good deal like them in some ways. The Father of the Gods is full of joy at having such a glorious castle, and the Mother of the Gods is full of dread at the price that must be paid to the giants for building it. A terrible price indeed it is, as she does not hesitate to remind him, for the gods have promised to give

the giants the beautiful Goddess of Love and Youth. It was a foolish and wicked promise for them to make, foolish because if they kept it they could never in the world get on without her, and wicked because they did not intend to keep it. The homes of the gods, like any other homes, would be dreary enough without the Goddess of Love, but it is worse than that, for she has a garden where apples grow for the gods to eat; it is eating these apples that makes the gods always young, and nobody but her knows how to care for them, so that if she goes away the gods will begin to grow old at once and will soon die."

"Were the apples like that—oh, what was it? you know the name of it— that the other gods used to eat?"

"Ambrosia? Yes, something like it, but not quite. You know the gods who ate ambrosia would live forever and are living still; we have seen some of them ourselves up among the stars. But these gods have to eat the apples often, and they must get them from the Goddess of Love. This is much the better story of the two, I think, because it shows us how gods and other people, as long as they keep love with them, will be always young, no matter how many years they may live; and how, if they let it go away from them, they will be old at once, no matter how few their years.

"All this the Father and the Mother of the Gods are talking over together now, and he tells her how the Fire God, who proposed the bargain in the first place, said that the price need never be paid and that he trusts the Fire God may yet find some way out of the trouble. Yet the giants must be made in some way to give up their price of themselves, for the Father of the Gods has the words of the promise cut

upon his spear, and he cannot break a promise that he has once made. The Fire God has gone away now to search through the world for something that may be offered to the giants instead of the Goddess of Love. And now I see her come, running to the Father of the Gods for protection, and the other gods are here, to help her if they can, and the giants themselves have come to claim her for the building of the castle.

"Well, to be sure, they are all in a fine state of excitement. The giants are big, dreadful-looking fellows, with clubs made of the trunks of trees, and the poor goddess does not want to go with them in the least. All the other gods declare, too, that she shall not go with them, and the giants insist that she shall. The Thunder God is there and he has a wonderful hammer, a blow of which is like a stroke of lightning. He is about to strike the giants with it, and that, you may be sure, would settle the whole matter, big as they are, but the Father of the Gods will not let him harm them. He has promised, and whatever happens he cannot break his word.

"While everything is in this dreadful state, the Fire God comes back from his search. It is not a very cheering story that he has to tell. He has been through all the world, he says, and he has asked everywhere what there is that is as good for gods or giants, or anybody else, as the love of a woman, which makes those who have it always young. But the people in those days knew more than a good many of the people in these days, and everywhere they laughed at him and told him that he might as well give up his search, for he would never find what he sought."

"What do you mean by 'the people in those days'?" the child asked; "I thought you said you could see them right here in the fire now."

"So I can, but it is the beauty of these pictures in the fire that I can see things that happened years ago, thousands of years ago, if I like, just as well as things that happen now, and perhaps a little better. So you see the Fire God has not had very good luck, but as he was coming back, he says, he passed near where the river nymphs were, and they called to him, telling him that their beautiful gold had been stolen, and begging him to ask the Father of the Gods to get it back for them. They told him, too, about the wicked dwarf who stole it, and how, before he could steal it, he had to swear never again, as long as he lived, to love anybody or anything. The Fire God seems to have heard about the dwarf somewhere else, too, for he says that he has already made the magic ring out of the gold, that by the help of the ring he has compelled all the other dwarfs to obey him and serve him, and has piled up such a treasure of gold and jewels as was never seen before; and finally, that, if the gods are not careful, the dwarf will soon rule over them and the whole world besides.

"So it seems that there is one person in the world who has found something which he thinks is worth more than love. And there are at least two others who are as foolish as he, though they may not be quite so wicked. And these are the giants, for when they hear the Fire God tell of the wonderful treasure that the dwarf has heaped together, they say to the gods that they think the dwarf is quite right, they would rather have all that gold than the love of any