

The Shape of Things to Come Imagery and Idea in Wagner's Mines of Falun

Text: Peter Bassett



A mineshaft of the Falun Mine.



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The Mines of Falun (*Die Bergwerke zu Falun*) is a prose draft written by **Wagner** in March 1842. No music was composed for it. Wagner prepared the scenario on commission for the Bohemian composer **Josef Dessauer**¹ who had asked specifically for a libretto that was similar in style to *Der fliegende Holländer*. Chronologically, it falls between *Holländer* and *Tannhäuser* and shares dramatic features with both and with other works still to come. It occupies a key position on the Wagnerian timeline. The sketch was eventually found in 1905 amongst the papers of Wagner's Dresden assistant August Röckel, who may have intended to set it to music.²

It is based on a short story by **E. T. A. Hoffmann**, Wagner's favourite author in his teens and an associate of both his stepfather Ludwig Geyer (they were members of the same theatrical troupe in Dresden) and uncle, **Adolf Wagner**, whose correspondence with Hoffmann survives. Hoffmann

was the father of several literary movements including surrealism and the supernatural and horror schools of writing, and was one of the most influential literary figures of the nineteenth century.

The story is set in the mining town of Falun in Sweden, and concerns a young miner Elis Froebom (Wagner uses only his first name) who had given up his former profession as a seafarer because of his distress on returning from a long voyage to find that his mother had died during his absence (a precursor to Parsifal's pain on hearing of Herzeleide's death during his absence). Elis had had a dream about wonderful riches hidden deep in the earth and, in that dream, had met a woman of unearthly beauty (an anticipation of Tannhäuser's encounter with the goddess of love in the Venusberg). He knows that when sailors have dreams of riches on the seabed, these are premonitions of

impending death at sea. Dreams foreshadow tragic events in *Holländer*, *Lohengrin*, *Die Walküre* and *Götterdämmerung*.

Elis has seen a lovely, gracious girl – an angel he calls her – named Ulla, on his return to land (the Dutchman refers to Senta as his angel). The ghostly form of an old miner had also appeared to Elis while he was in the mine shaft, telling him to renounce all thoughts of love if he wished to see the treasures of the mine (a precursor of Alberich?).³ The old miner is identified as Torbern, who had been entombed by an avalanche a hundred years earlier but still appeared from time to time with strangers from distant places (like another Titirel). Momentarily, Elis is encouraged to think of returning to sea, but thoughts of Ulla change his mind. Another seafarer called Joens also has his heart set on Ulla, and there is some confusion as to where her affections lie. The first Act ends with Joens asking Ulla's father for her hand in marriage, much to her surprise and Elis's anguish. Like a combination of the Dutchman and Erik, Elis believes he has been betrayed; the old miner's warning was true.

The second Act takes place deep in the dimly lit mineshaft (shades of Nibelheim). Elis tries to summon up the ghostly miner Torbern, rather like Caspar calling up Samiel in *Der Freischütz* or Wotan summoning Erda, and vows never to return to the sunlight again but to spend his days with the Mountain Queen – again like Tannhäuser. 'Those above are false and treacherous' says Elis, anticipating the words of the Rhinedaughters in the closing moments of *Das Rheingold*: 'Goodness and truth dwell but in the deep: false and base are those who dwell up above.' The Mountain Queen and her throne appear in luminous splendour, surrounded by crystalline forms that seem to be maidens, embracing in dance. Suddenly the voice of Ulla is heard from above, assuring Elis that she is his. The vision disappears and the mineshaft returns to its original state – just as Venus and her cohorts vanish with the mention of Elisabeth's name. Ulla and the miners descend into the shaft and locate Elis, telling him that Joens has withdrawn his suit and that he, Elis, is Ulla's one and only beloved.

The third Act, back on the surface, opens with preparations for the wedding festivities. Elis appears in his finery, like Walther on the day of the song contest. But he seems distracted and speaks about strange things underground where, he says, the story of their lives is engraved on a precious red stone. Ulla grows increasingly alarmed as he talks about their hearts being fused with the strange veins of the stone. He is determined to get the stone for her, and ignores her anxious pleas to stay and not to go into the mine. He tears himself away and disappears into the mineshaft while she weeps bitterly.

Joyous wedding music is heard in a juxtaposition of dread and celebration similar to that in the *Dutchman*, *Lohengrin* and *Götterdämmerung*. A procession of miners arrives in their festal finery, and with the townspeople following with flags and insignia, anticipating the festival meadow scene in *Die Meistersinger*. The bride, full of foreboding, is led out in her wedding dress and, while everyone waits for the groom, there is dancing and singing. Suddenly a terrific crash is heard, followed by muffled thunder. The mineshaft in the background has subsided and the entrance has caved in! Frantic efforts on the part of the miners are to no avail and Elis is declared lost, while Ulla sinks down as if dead.

The major difference between Wagner's scenario and Hofmann's original story is that the latter ends with a scene fifty years later. Ulla, by then an old woman, has been pretty much forgotten by the people of Fa-

lun. Miners clearing a passage between two shafts uncover the body of a young man lying in vitriolated water. When the body is brought to the surface, it appears petrified and perfectly preserved, with wedding clothes intact and even flowers on the breast. The old woman, who has come every St John's day (Johannistag) to gaze into the mine, weep and wring her hands, sees at last her beloved Elis. Like Isolde, she breathes her last, cradling her bridegroom's body.

Wagner decided not to dramatize this final scene, which would indeed have been difficult to tack on in a convincing way. But many who read his scenario expressed surprise that he hadn't included what they thought was the main point of Hoffmann's story. The discovery of the preserved body of a miner at the Falun mine was in fact a real event that had happened in 1719.⁴ For Wagner, the dramatically important points lay elsewhere. But it does seem that the writings of Hoffmann made a lasting impression on him, and that many of the vivid images



E.T.A. Hoffmann and Ludwig Devrient meeting in Lutter & Wegner's Wine Bar, Berlin. Painting by Hermann Kramer.

we associate with his works – eerily lit subterranean caverns, alluring temptresses, the competing attractions of sacred and profane love that send young men mad, the cruel juxtaposition of joy and tragedy, even the renunciation of love as the price of worldly riches – have their origins in the weird and wonderful world of E.T.A. Hoffmann.

¹ In *Mein Leben* Wagner refers to him as ‘a Jewish musician and composer not devoid of talent, and who in fact achieved a certain reputation, but who was best known to his friends for his hypochondria’.

² For an in-depth analysis of Wagner’s sketch and its English translation see Marc A Weiner: Richard Wagner’s Use of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s ‘The Mines of Falun’. 19th Century Music, Vol. 5, No 3 (Spring, 1982), pp. 201-214, published by University of California Press.

³ Although the Falun mine was mainly associated with sulphur, copper, zinc and iron, 5 tons of gold and 380 tons of silver were also extracted. Mining ceased in December 1992 but today it is possible to visit the mine on guided tours. It is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. See <http://www.falugruva.se/en/Falu-Gruva/Visit-us/History-of-Falu-Mine/>.

⁴ On 2 December 1719, miners began extracting ore in a part of the mine that had not been used for a long time. Suddenly the body of a man appeared, apparently the victim of a recent catastrophe since the remains had not deteriorated. The discovery attracted a lot of attention but no one could identify the young man, and it had been many years since any young miner had been reported missing. When Margareta Oldsdotter, an elderly lady, heard about it, she realised that it was Mats Israelsson, commonly known as Fet-Mats, who had come back to her. She recognised the young man at once. The couple had been abruptly separated forty-two years earlier when Mats Israelsson had disappeared despite being engaged to Margareta. Mats had died when part of the mine caved in, and the copper sulphate had preserved his body. Mats Israelsson’s remains were still on public display in 1930 when they were finally laid to rest in the cemetery at Stora Kopparberg Church.



The grave stone of Mats Israelsson at Stora Kopparbergs kyrka.



The interior of the mines at Falun.