

Synopsis

ACT I

Caught in a violent storm, the knight Huldbrand of Ringstetten loses his way in the forest and takes shelter in a humble fisherman's hut. There, an old fisherman and his wife anxiously await the return of their foster daughter Undine, who has run off despite the raging wind and rain. They found the girl years ago on the very day their own child drowned in a nearby lake. Since then, Undine has lived with them—beloved, but difficult, prone to wild moods and sudden whims.

Huldbrand offers to search for her. Meanwhile, Undine—who is in truth a water spirit—sits by the lakeshore, arguing with her uncle Kühleborn, a powerful spirit of the waters. She refuses to believe his warnings about human deceit: she has left her natural element in order to gain a soul through marriage to a mortal.

At that moment Huldbrand appears, and Kühleborn retreats into the depths. Though the knight is already betrothed to Berthalda, the Duke's foster daughter, he is instantly captivated by Undine. He falls passionately in love and asks her to become his bride and follow him to his castle. Undine eagerly agrees and cleverly distracts him from Kühleborn's ominous calls rising from the lake.

They return to the fisherman's hut, where another traveler has taken refuge: the pious priest Heilmann. Without delay, Huldbrand and Undine ask for his blessing, and with the consent of the fisherman and his wife, they are married. The storm subsides. The newlyweds bid farewell and set off for the Duke's castle with Heilmann—unaware that Kühleborn follows them in secret, determined to watch over his niece.

ACT II

The Duke is initially surprised by his knight's sudden change of heart, but he receives Huldbrand and Undine graciously. Berthalda, the rejected bride, conceals her disappointment and even seeks Undine's company, hoping to uncover the mystery of her origins.

As the two women sit together in the castle courtyard, Kühleborn's voice suddenly rises from the depths of a well, calling Undine. He reveals a secret: Berthalda, the Duke's foster daughter, is in fact the fisherman's long-lost child, believed to have drowned.

During a grand banquet, Undine—innocently thinking to bring joy—presents the fisherman and his wife to the Duke and reveals the truth. But Berthalda, proud and humiliated, refuses to acknowledge them as her parents and flees the hall in tears. Huldbrand, whose feelings for Berthalda have begun to rekindle, accuses Undine of wounding her.

He later finds Berthalda distraught by a stream and, despite Kühleborn's threatening voice, comforts her and gives her a precious necklace. Undine, unaware of his betrayal, continues to treat Berthalda as a friend.

Soon after, by the lakeshore, disaster strikes: a giant hand rises from the water and snatches the necklace from Berthalda. Realizing Kühleborn is behind it, Undine pleads with the water

spirits to return the jewel. Instead, a young man appears with a magnificent coral necklace—but Berthalda refuses it.

In anger, Huldbrand curses Undine, claiming she has bewitched him through dark powers. In doing so, he breaks the one strict condition placed upon him: never to insult his wife while she is near water, her true element.

“Alas—what have you done?” Undine cries. Bound by his words, she must return to the realm of the water spirits. Before their eyes, she is enveloped in mist and drawn down into the depths.

ACT III

Huldbrand’s grief does not last long. He turns once more to Berthalda and prepares to marry her. Neither Kühleborn’s fury—sworn to avenge the knight’s betrayal—nor Heilmann’s warnings to remain faithful to his rightful wife can dissuade him.

Yet dark shadows hang over the wedding celebrations. The fisherman and his wife cannot forget Undine, who, for all her wildness, was dearer to them than the proud Berthalda. And amid the songs and dances, the distant, haunting lament of the forsaken water spirit can be heard.

Only Berthalda appears carefree, refusing to acknowledge any danger. She even insists that a sealed well be reopened so its gentle sound may accompany the festivities. But the moment Huldbrand orders it unsealed, a powerful jet of water erupts—and in its spray appears Undine.

She reaches out to her beloved. As if drawn by an irresistible force, Huldbrand approaches her. In a final, fatal kiss, he dies in her embrace and descends with her into the realm of the water spirits.

Michael Stegemann, © 1993

Translation: DG