



OUWÊ, OUWÊ !

“Ach, Wolfie, Wolfie - what have we come down to now?”

“Eh?” said Wolfie, disturbed from his afternoon nap. “What’s that you say, Wally?”

“I say” said Wally again, “I say it’s what I always said would happen to us. Look at us - just two old gits, gone past it, and too scared to retire.”

“Speak for yourself,” said Wolfie, settling back again and pulling his battered Panama hat back down over his red-rimmed eyes. “I had a good time last night with those girls, even if you didn’t. What happened to you anyway? Get frightened or what? They were two nice ladies, that Kathy and Hilda - very nice ladies indeed.” He pointed an accusing finger at Wally. “And you chased them off with all that nonsense about death and loss and so on. What were you thinking of? We didn’t want none of that!”

“Und iemer mêr ouwê, iemer mêr ouwê!” replied Wally enigmatically.

Wolfie sat up, awake and angry now. “That’s just what I mean, you old fart!” he yelled. “You sit there, spouting words of Woe - what lady is going to hang out with us then?”

“Owê wie jamerliche junge liute tuont!” replied Wally sadly. “You young folks - you never remember that we’re all going to die.”

“Why should I remember that, you old fool?” Wolfie was really annoyed now. It was bad enough that he’d lost the chance he had with that Kathy - she was a good sort too, you could see it in her eyes, sort of twinkly underneath that violet hair-do and the horn-rimmed spectacles - would have stopped off with him last night if it hadn’t been for this old goat; and now he had to sit and listen to him drivel on about the morals of young people? It was enough to drive a poet to drink.

“Owê war sint verswunden alliu miniu jâr! Ist mir min leben getroumet, oder ist ez wâr?” Wally sighed and peered out of the grubby window of the guest-house, with its unsurpassed view of decrepit roofs, seagulls, central-heating stacks and satellite dishes, to a grey sky filled with drizzle. Truly, these rest-days from their shows at the Alhambra - they were grim.

“You may have dreamed them,” grumbled Wolfie, “I certainly didn’t. And I don’t intend to let the rest of my days drift past. Remember that old song of mine, tappity-tap, tappity-tap - what’s the words again?” He thought for a moment - really, he’d have to start writing them down. The night before last, he’d lost the thread and had to finish up with a “Tandaradei tandaradei” to fill in the gaps. Not that the audience - barely a dozen old-timers - noticed. Ah, yes:

“Ursprinc bluomen, loup ûz dringen,
und der luft des meigen urbort vogel ir alten dôn:
etswenn ich kan niuwez singen,
sô der rîfe ligt, guot wîp, noch allez ân dîn lôn.”

Wally sighed: “No good, Wolfie, it’s no good. Those days are all past and beyond reach now. Als ich gedenke an manegen wûnneclîchen tac, die mir sint enpfallen als in daz mer ein slac, iemer mêre ouwê.”

“Ouwê, ouwê, ouwê” mocked Wolfie, getting up off his bed to put on another cardigan - it was getting cold now, and they could not afford to feed any coins to the meter for an hour or two. “Why don’t you just change the record, Wally, and play another tune. You’d feel so much happier.”

Wally looked at his stage-partner for a moment. “Wally and Wolfie,” he muttered, “The Two Good-Old Boys. Look at us, Wolfie: there was a time when we were young, we had the world at our feet and all the women we could hope for. The poetry tripped off our lips like music, there was

no stopping us. 'Under der linden an der heide, dâ unser zweier bette was, dâ mugt ihr vinden schône beide gebrochen bluomen unde gras.' We were the Minnesänger, then -"

"That's it, Wally, that's it," shouted Wolfie encouragingly. "That's just what it was like. 'Guot wîp' and so on, eh? Come on, we can have those days again - not so carefree perhaps - we've got to watch our tickers - but that Hilda had the hots for you last night, Kathy said so - you must have seen how she looked at you? Oh, Wally, you haven't lost your touch yet!"

But Wally had already subsided. "Not enough thinking, Wolfie, not enough thinking. Remember this one? - 'Ich saz ûf eime steine, und dahte bein mit beine. Dar ûf satzt ich den ellenbogen: ich hete in mîne hant gesmogen daz kinne und ein mîn wange. Dô dahte ich mir vil ange, wie man zer welte solte leben.' Not enough of that any more, Wolfie," he muttered, wagging at finger at his partner, "not enough at all."

Wolfie paced up and down, blowing in his hands. He fumbled in his pockets, found a crumpled packet and excavated a half-smoked cigarette. He struck a match and lit it and inhaled eagerly, and coughed.

"There you go, heading for an early grave," observed Wally blackly. "And you know the landlady doesn't like you smoking indoors. You'll get us thrown out, you will."

Wolfie tapped the side of his nose and winked rheumily through the clouds of smoke. "Mrs. Greiffenberg doesn't mind a bit," he whispered loudly, "not after that soirée she threw last Saturday." He smiled to himself and sang a song in a remarkably sweet voice, one of their more popular songs from the show. 'Werdez wîp, dîn sœziu gœtete und dîn minneclîcher zorn hât mir vil vrœude erwert.'"

Wally shook his head at great length. "You talk of all the good times, Wolfie, as if they were the here and now. I tell you, they've all gone, every single, solitary, sodding one of them. All gone, never to come back. All gone. We're failures, we're past it, we're yesterday's boys, we'll never get those days back again. 'Nu bin ich erwachet, und ist mir unbekant daz mir hie vor was kündic als mîn ander hant. Liut unde lant, dar inn ich von kinde bin erzogen die sint mir worden frömde reht als ez sî gelogen.' Where have they all gone, Wolfie?"

"Well, most of them have died," said Wolfie somewhat brutally. "We're in our seventies now, Wally, what do you expect? We're two generations beyond our prime, the young 'uns have taken over, not many want to see us these days. But - Wally, Wally - we still get an audience, we're still hanging in there, we're not done yet." He opened the window and started waving a cushion about to disperse the clouds of smoke - he could hear Mrs G. coughing melodramatically in the passage outside. "We're still hanging in there - what else can we do? Give up? Retire - on what, Wally? We're as poor as the day we were born!"

Wally's only response was to lie gazing at the ceiling and recite the following words: "Owê wie uns mit sœzen dingen ist vergeben! Ich sihe die gallen mitten in dem honege sweben."

"That'll be it," said Wolfie sourly. "How does it go on? 'Die welt ist ûzen schœne, wîz grœnen unde rôt, und innân swarzer varwe, vinster sam der tôt.' You're a dead man, Wally, and you don't even know it. Look, what is it with you? Last year, we even got a letter from the BBC, asking us to appear on 'Strictly Medieval Poetry'."

"No, we didn't," interrupted Wally. "We got an enquiry from the BBC asking us if we would like to appear on 'Strictly Medieval Poetry' if some of their other guests fell through. That Dee-dee von Eist and that Ozzie von Wolkenstein - they're today's boys, they got on, didn't they? Not us. We never heard nothing from them again. Not a peep. They must have rumbled us, someone told them how old we were."

"So?" asked Wolfie. "Shit happens, Wally. Mistakes happen too - perhaps it was a mistake. Mistakes - sometimes for good, sometimes for bad. We just get on with it. Remember our motto

from the old days? ‘Wer sleht den lewen? wer sleht den risen? Wer überwindet jenen unt disen?’ It was us, Wally, it was us! We did it, we slew the lions and conquered the giants! And we can do it again. Look,” he said, pulling a crumpled piece of paper from his trouser pocket, “I’ve got Kathy’s phone number here. Why don’t I give her a ring and you and me and her and Hilda can maybe go out for a couple of drinks, maybe a bar-meal, somewhere quiet, somewhere nice, you know, give them a bit of the old poetry, then we can split up, you know, and I’ll go back to Kathy’s place, and you and Hilda -”

Wally brushed away these suggestions as if they were just tiresome gnats. “Leave me alone, Wolfie. ‘Sô wolte ich denne singen wol, und niemer mêr ouwê, niemer mêr ouwê.’”

“Good grief,” muttered Wolfie, suddenly exhausted with all the arguments. “Well, at least you’ll sing it. Right, Wally, I’m going out and make that phone call. You can come along if you want, I don’t care. But I tell you this, when this run at the Alhambra is over, you can find yourself another partner, because I’m branching out on my own. You’re dragging me down, Wally. Remember when we were the star billing, just setting out, the bright lights of Cambridge Circus and Leicester Square? Our names were in lights, neon, huge letters: ‘Eschenbach and Vogelweide!’ They came in their thousands. Look at us now.”

With these words, he pulled on a greasy raincoat, pocketed some loose change from an ash-tray and went out to find a phone-box.