



THE RIDE OF THE VALKYRIES

We went down Ricky's place last night. Cheap night out, for cheap thrills. Like all cheap thrills, they didn't last. Ricky was down in the dumps - we knew that as soon as we got to the door and Charlie said "Hey, Ricky, wassup!?" and Ricky frowned at him and said, "Mr Wagner, to you, if you please." That sure put a dampener on the evening, I can tell you. The place was deserted. Would have been normal for eight o'clock on a wet Tuesday in the old town - but this was ten on a Saturday night, for Pete's sake. Looks like Ricky's place - sorry, the "Bayreuth Bar" - has fallen on hard times. There was the usual billing - The Flying Dutchman providing a cabaret act. Back by Popular Demand, if you could believe the posters outside, though I don't know anyone who'd ask to have the old timer back. We'd all heard his interminable stories before, and his jokes were as thin as his hair. Seems Ricky had a soft spot for the old man. Live music, too, we were promised. Charlie groaned when he saw it was the Meistersänger again. "Thought they'd gone back to Nürnberg," he muttered when we went in. "Auf Wiedersehen, pet, know what I mean?"

It was gloomy inside, and cold. Exactly two other customers there. One, dozing in front of a glass of beer, looked like he'd been there since his grandma's funeral in 1947; the other, a young guy, on the opposite side of the room, was naively eyeing up the waitresses who lounged against the bar. I could have told him - don't waste your time, sunshine: Isolde's got the hots for Tristan the French barman, and Elisabeth's still tangled up with Tannhäuser. You'll get hurt, I keep telling Lizzie, the guy's not good enough for you; but she just lowers her eyes and ignores me. Pity - she's a real sweet kid. Maybe this loser thought he could put the make on Brunnhilde. Can't blame him in that light - she's got the hips, she's got the bust, she's got hair like gold. But, hell, the woman's old enough to be my mother, when you look at her in the cold light of day. Believe me: I've been there. The shock can kill a guy - you just take Siegfried, who used to be the bouncer. Never recovered, did Siggi, after waking up next to Brunnhilde.

We sat down at our usual table - me, Charlie, Steve and Bill. A night out for the boys. Boys still hanging on to memories, when Ricky's was THE place to be seen. "Bayreuth Bar" - Bill always got it mixed up with his baseball hero, Babe Ruth, and that really riled Ricky. Ricky was proud of his place. That was a few years back now. He had the Valkyries on the door, dressed in their leathers and winged helmets - that sold a few tickets, I can tell you. He had Siggi behind the bar, cracking open bottles of Bollinger with his bare teeth. Parsifal as the MC on stage, introducing some pretty good acts - the Meistersänger were something of a novelty then; even Daland the Dutchman had a few original stories to tell. Isolde and Elisabeth were new to the scene, so still had a sparkle in their eyes. Ah, and Ricky's "Ride"! I'll come to that later, Ricky's "Ride".

Ricky sidled over to see us. His eyes were shifty, like he wanted to apologise for his cool welcome but didn't know how. Bill broke the ice - "Hey, Ricky, what you got for us tonight, then? Some of that old Ring Cycle magic? Some of that old - what d'ya'call it - 'Gesamtwerk' liquor? Whad'ya say, buddy?"

Ricky coughed. "Got a couple of crates of Rheingold just come in, boys," he muttered. "Could do you a deal on a few bottles?"

"That's the stuff, Ricky," shouted Bill, putting his heart into this real cheery act. Felt sorry for Ricky, in this dump of his. "What say we take a coupla bottles apiece - and one for yourself, Ricky! Hey, and send that new waitress over - what's her name?"

Ricky glowered at Bill. "Kundry's her name," he said. "I'm keeping her out of trouble. She's my only hope after that nut-case Parsifal walked out on me." Ricky turned to get the beers in, then swung on us, almost snarling. "You just stay away from her!" He brought us the beers himself. They were warm. Warmer than Ricky's club by a long way.

Charlie got out the cards after we had exhausted our eyes in contemplation of the Rhine-maidens bosoms, as they rested on the bar. It was a sad sight for a red-blooded guy: you can look, but you can't touch a thing. We played black-jack a while, then pontoon. At about midnight, the lights over the stage flickered and the Flying Dutchman came on. He was plain terrible, just as we remembered. Never a young man, he now looked about eighty, had the wit and sharpness of an old dead guy of ninety. By then, another half-dozen souls had strayed into Ricky's, bringing with them all the damp and cold of the city streets. There was one group I knew meant trouble - I'd seen them chucked out of Wagner's place before, in the good old days when Ricky had a chucker-out. Now they just left when they got bored. Small guys, as wide as they were tall, really tough-looking. Called themselves the Nibelungen, for Chrissake. Still, it didn't take them long to chase the Dutchman off the stage under a hail of Rheingold empties, which was a public service as far as we were concerned. Then the Meistersänger came on, all toggged up in their Motown zoot-suits, hammered out a few songs that no one listened to, and twirled for the spotlights.

At about one, there was a bit of excitement at the bar when Isolde's man turned up. He was a king in narcotics, was Marky Mark, and jealous as hell of Isolde. Never married her, but wasn't letting anyone else near, either. He came in tonight just as Isolde and Tristan were mooning over each other, and Tristan's longing hands had got to places where they shouldn't, if you know what I mean. Marky Mark had a couple of gorillas with him. They dragged Tristan outside, came back five minutes later, alone, not a hair out of place. Isolde burst into tears, Ricky tried not to get involved. Then the other barman, Lohengrin, sticks his oar in. Funny guy, Lohengrin: got a look in his eyes which makes you think he's got the secret to the universe, but it's just because he's all messed up inside. Buys his gear from Marky Mark often enough and can't get clean. Saw him a couple of years back, crazed out of his mind, half-naked in the street. Ricky said he was doing cold-turkey, and it wasn't a pleasant sight. But Lohengrin had given up the turkey for Christmas; which meant that he didn't have much judgement when it came to picking a fight, and soon he was flat on the floor, with his nose spouting blood. Brunnhilde cradled him in her arms - she's a good woman that, for being way the wrong side of fifty - and gave him the full benefit of her emotions.

It was better than watching the Flying Dutchman and the Meistersänger any day.

You might think, what do these guys want to spend their nights here? Well, at two on the dot, what we'd all been waiting for: Ricky wound up his gramophone and gave us a blast of the "Ride of the Valkyries". Rousing stuff that, and a cue for Brunnhilde and a couple of the other old girls to get their kit off and flee round the room. Gets you right there, the first couple of times, if you don't look too closely at the wrinkles. Keep your eye on the fleshy bits, that's what I tell the guys. Fleshy bits and the leather corsets, with a few bottles of warm Rheingold or "Gesamtwerk" under your belt - works wonders. Ricky was proud of his "Ride" - it always brought in a few new customers, especially the Orientals. But the girls were a bit past their prime, and puffed a bit when it came to leaping from table to table. Still, it woke up Steve and Bill who had dozed off.

And then it was the Twilight Hour - Ricky sold us beers at half-price, the bar-staff got to sit with

any customers still able to stay upright, and we had a good time. Despite Ricky's warnings, Kundry came over and sat with us. She was a girl and a half, brunette, legs all the way up; but with a mouth on her that you wouldn't want your old mother to hear. She had some pretty racy stories about Parsifal, too, things you'd be straining to believe. Guy was a real slime-ball, from what she said - acted dead simple, but knew more than he was telling. Then she put her long legs over Bill's, and the two of them went into a clinch. Brunnhilde was still comforting Lohengrin in the folds of her bosom. Isolde was weeping her pretty eyes all red into a handkerchief. The Flying Dutchman dreamed uneasily in a corner, but the Meistersänger had got their wages and were off home, no keeping them here longer than was necessary. That left me to share Elisabeth with the guys, since Tannhäuser had been sent out on some fool's errand for Ricky. One third of Lizzie was not what I had in mind last night, so I made my excuses and left. As I stepped into the cool morning air, the lights over Ricky's place winked once - "Bayreuth Bar" - then popped out.

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