

Peter Svetina

THE MAGIC RING

Illustrated by Damijan Stepančič

Ljudmila Krasinc was leaning on the sill of an open window, looking towards the bridge. What a bustle there was below her! She had been in town for almost a month, but she didn't know anybody. Well, for a "good day" and "how are you" she did, of course, but there was nobody with whom she could chat or go for a walk. When she wasn't leaning against the window, she lay on the sofa, wandering why she was so lonely.

But on that particular Saturday she simply couldn't resist the temptation of the bustle outside. She walked down, on to the bank of the river, and into the middle of the Saturday market. How many useful and useless things people were selling! Pictures, old records, worn shoes, hat racks, clothes pegs, old pots and jewellery ... Oh, and what is this?

The magic ring. That's what it said next to it.

"Excuse me," Ljudmila Krasinc spoke up, "is this really a magic ring?"

"That's what it says, love," the seller replied.

"What sort of magic does it perform?" Ljudmila Krasinc asked.

"All sorts," the seller said.

"I'll buy it," Ljudmila Krasinc decided, pulled a purse from her bag and paid for the ring.

But what rotten luck! As she tried to slide the ring on to her finger, it fell to the ground and rolled away among the stands and people along the bank of the river.

"Oh dear!" Ljudmila Krasinc shouted. "Catch it! Grab it!"

"Who?" responded the man who not far away turned the handle of his barrel organ. "A thief? A thief? Where is he? Where?"

"No! My ring has escaped!" Ljudmila Krasinc explained excitedly and ran after it.

The organ-grinder followed her. "I'm behind you, right behind you!"

And so Ljudmila Krasinc and the organ-grinder ran after the ring.

They passed a group of tourists with cameras. In fact, they were members of the Vienna Society of Opera Lovers who had decided to do a bit of sight-seeing before the matinee.

Oh, Oh, isn't that Ljudmila Krasinc, the well-known opera singer?

"Catch the ring, catch it!" Ljudmila Krasinc kept shouting.

The opera buffs ran after her to help her catch the ring.

And so they ran: Ljudmila Krasinc, the organ-grinder with his barrel organ and the opera lovers with their cameras.

When they reached the bridge in front of the City Hall, a bride and a bridegroom were just walking up to the entrance with their witnesses and wedding guests.

"Catch it! Grab the ring!" Ljudmila Krasinc kept shouting.

"What ring?" the bride fluttered. "Have you given a ring to another girl as well? Oh, unlucky me!" And she nearly fainted. But the bridegroom assured her that he hadn't given a ring to anyone else, and that she was the only queen of his heart. However, it would be nice to help someone in need. And so they ran after the crowd, together with their witnesses and wedding guests.

Running now were: Ljudmila Krasinc, the organ-grinder, the opera lovers with their cameras, the bride and the bridegroom with their guests and witnesses.

The ring hit against a curb, rolled across the bridge and on the opposite bank began to roll back towards the market.

Two market ladies were returning home along the bank, pushing their carts before them.

“Catch it, grab it! My ring!” Ljudmila Krasinc kept yelling.

Rings do not run along the ground every day, the market ladies thought. So they followed the column of runners.

And so they ran: Ljudmila Krasinc, the organ-grinder with his barrel organ, opera buffs with their cameras, the bride and the bridegroom with their witnesses and wedding guests, and two market ladies with their carts.

The ring rolled under the tables and chairs that were set out in front of a small hotel. Porter Nikolaj had just unloaded three suitcases, a bag and a hat box, while a waiter was bringing a tray with a cup of cocoa for Mrs. Naberžnik and a glass of wine for Mr. Koselj. As the group of runners approached, the guests began to rise. One of them inadvertently kicked the ring with his shoe and sent it rolling on along the bank.

“Grab it! Catch it!” Ljudmila Krasinc shouted. Before the guests realised what was happening, the ring was already past them, and so were the runners, the porter, the waiter, and also Mrs. Naberžnik and Mr. Koselj.

And so they ran: Ljudmila Krasinc, the organ-grinder with his barrel organ, opera lovers with their cameras, the bride and the bridegroom with their witnesses and wedding guests, two market ladies with their carts, Mrs. Naberžnik, Mr. Koselj, the waiter with a cup of cocoa and a glass of wine on a tray, and porter Nikolaj with his trolley.

The ring hit against a street lamp, swerved onto another bridge and rolled across it back to the other side.

Just then Mummy with Maruška was coming from the Upper Square. Maruška was pulling at the ears of her plush rabbit.

“Catch it! Grab it!” Ljudmila Krasinc kept shouting.

When Mummy with Maruška and the plush rabbit saw the ring, she, too, ran after the runners.

And so Ljudmila Krasinc, the organ-grinder with his barrel organ, opera lovers with their cameras, the bride and the bridegroom with their witnesses and wedding guests, two market ladies with their carts, Mrs. Naberžnik, Mr. Koselj, the waiter with cocoa and wine, porter Nikolaj with his trolley, Mummy with Maruška and plush rabbit ran to catch the ring.

But before they could, the ring rolled under the seller’s stall to the edge of the river bank and, splash!, fell into the water.

Ljudmila Krasinc and the runners crowded around the stall and stared at the river. On its surface they could see little circles slowly drawing away from the sinking ring.

Ljudmila Krasinc was the first to get her breath back, although she had run fastest and farthest. “Dear mister ring seller,” she said, very upset. “You sold me a ring, claiming it was a magic ring. But it escaped me and sank in the river right behind you. If it’s magic to buy something and remain without it, then thank you very much for such magic! I call it cheating!”

The ring seller rubbed his chin and said:

“What can I say? Such rings were magic right up till now. I had twelve of them, well, this one was the last one, and with all of them some sort of magic happened. What exactly did you want the ring to do for you?”

Ljudmila Krasinc blushed and said quietly: “I’m very lonely, so I wanted to have some friends, and I thought it would be easier with the help of the magic ring...”

“Friends, you said?” the seller replied. “Well... haven’t you turned around? Haven’t you seen how many people helped you trying to catch the ring?”

Ljudmila Krasinc turned around and saw all the breathless faces.

“Do you think you could find a friend among them?” the seller asked.

Ljudmila Krasinc blushed even more, and the people surrounding her gave her encouraging smiles. And so they stood there. As if lost for words.

At the end of the story Mrs. Naberžnik and Mr. Koselj will invite Ljudmila Krasinc for coffee, the opera buffs will from the first to the last one want to have a picture taken with her, the bride and the bridegroom will timidly ask her to sing Schubert's *Ave Maria* at their wedding, the market ladies will always keep the best lettuce for her, and little Maruška, who with her plush rabbit sat in a pram, will in fifteen years' time ask Ljudmila Kasinc to give her singing lessons. She will become an excellent singer.