

## Chapter 9 Meldy and Sophie decide to help Raoul

Two days later, Meldy had a pleasant surprise. She was given porridge for breakfast. Once she had finished, she poked her head round the kitchen door to thank Sylvie the cook.

“This porridge is very good!” she replied, “now I eat it as well. Madame has asked for it tomorrow.”

“Please,” asked Meldy, “do you have any black treacle? At home I always put it on top.” Sylvie didn’t know what it was but she promised to find out so Meldy went back to her sisters. They sat in silence for a while before Popster spoke.

“It’s ironic, isn’t it. Do you remember that last morning at home? You said, Kick, we’d never hear the last of it if we lost Meldy.”

“Well we all got lost, didn’t we!”

“It wasn’t your fault was it,” replied Meldy. “You couldn’t help it!”

“Well I did say you could come,” mused Popster.

“But isn’t it a good thing I did cos without me you’d still be at the Odious Bourgs!”

“Don’t!” laughed Kick.

Later that morning, Meldy and Sophie were in the garden.

“The choirboys will come soon,” said Sophie, “we can wave to them.”

“But we mustn’t throw anything,” added Meldy.

“We will not this time, but....”

They climbed the tree and propped themselves on top of the wall. They didn’t have long to wait. They ducked down as the choirmaster passed then leant back over as the boys approached. Most of them looked up and waved while others grinned at them. They were in pairs but the last boy was on his own. He made a point of indicating the empty space beside him.

“Where’s Raoul?” asked Meldy.

“I did not see him,” replied Sophie, “I wonder where he is?”

They were about to climb down when they saw him approaching. He was ambling along absentmindedly kicking a stone in the road but then he looked up.

“Hello Sophie Hello Meldy,” he said as he stopped.

“Hello Raoul!” Meldy asked, “why are you not with the others?”

“I have been expelled because the choirmaster does not like me. He was cross when I spoke out.”

“But that’s not fair!” cried Meldy. “You were honest and you said you’d always been told to tell the truth!”

Raoul shrugged.

“What is your last name?” asked Sophie.

“Delpierre.”

“Sophie, can’t your mother help?” asked Meldy “I’m sure you could persuade her to do something.”

“That is right.” replied Sophie, “She will listen to me. Where do you live Raoul?”

He gave her his address then the girls said goodbye. Sophie raced back to the house. “I will forget if I do not write it down!” she said.

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The twins were with Antoinette in the morning room. They had been practising folk songs but were now chatting.

“I have had letter from Antoine,” said Antoinette. “It took two weeks to get here so I will write back today and tell him all about my new friends.”

“Where might they be?” laughed Popster while looking round the room.

“I must have left them outside!” joked Antoinette in return. “He is studying at the Capital University of Liverpool and is planning to become a doctor.”

“Could he not have done that here?”

“Yes, if he stopped being a Modernist. Anyway, he prefers the freedoms in Liverpool. Look, I have a photograph.”

She showed the twins a photograph of a tall young man with floppy yellowish hair.

“He’s very handsome,” remarked Kick. She studied the photograph with care then said, “Patrice, look at all the cars in the background. Do you notice anything odd?”

“What do you mean,” replied Popster, then she saw it too. “Oh, I see! They’re all old!”

“What do you think that means?” asked Antoinette.

“Remember what Alain said,” replied Kick. “He thought we were from a parallel world. What if that is true but there’s also a time shift involved?”

“I do not understand,” replied Antionette.

Popster tried to explain what they had been thinking. “Our world and your world developed in parallel up to a point. Then, some events, such as the battle of Waterloo, turned out differently in each world. It appears that technological progress is slower here than in ours. Antoine’s picture shows cars that look at least fifty years old to us.”

“You’re right,” said Kick. “But let’s do some more practising.”

“Let us go to the ‘Grande Salle’,” suggested Antoinette. “because will be performing in there.” They went to the most impressive reception room in the house. Kick was amazed to see a full sized grand piano on a raised section of floor at one end of the room. She’d never played such an impressive instrument before.

“I’ll need to get used to this first,” she said as she sat at the keyboard.

“Antoine used to play it,” sighed Antoinette, “I long to hear it played again!”

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Sophie had found her mother and said, “Maman, may I ask a favour?”

“Of course my dear. What is it?”

Sophie told her about Raoul the choirboy and how he had been expelled from his choir.

"I feel it is all my fault," pleaded Sophie. "If I had not encouraged Esmeralda to throw things at them, Raoul would not be in trouble. He would not have been honest and the choirmaster would not have expelled him and..."

"It's my fault as well Madame," interjected Meldy. "I should have told Sophie not to do it!"

"Well," replied Madame, "you have both learnt something, have you not. Also, Raoul was right when he said honesty is best. Now you have seen where seemingly innocent games can lead. However, you have also been honest because you did not deny what you did. It might have been that the choirmaster did not like him so he used his impressive speech as an excuse to expel him. I thought I detected some hostility there."

"But that's not fair, Madame!" said Meldy.

"You are right, Esmeralda, it is not."

"Can we do anything, Maman?" asked Sophie. "We have his name and we know where he lives."

"Please Madame?" added Meldy.

"I am glad to see you taking his side like this so I think we should try."

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That evening, in their room, the sisters were talking to Amelie who had been hovering nervously by the door. They invited her in.

"You are so talented, Miss Catherine," said Amelie.

"Amelie, please call me Catherine."

"But I am only a servant and you are part of the family...."

"Amelie," said Kick, "Whatever happens down there, up here it's our space and we're all friends, isn't that right, Patrice?"

Popster agreed. "Amelie," she asked, "have you heard from Stephanie?"

"No, now I am really worried."

“Amelie,” said Popster, “we would love to hear all about her so please come in and sit with us.”

Meldy dozed by the window while they talked for over an hour.

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Madame was very pleased because the sisters were getting on so well with Antoinette and Sophie. One morning, they were having breakfast when she came to see them.

“Catherine, Patrice and Esmeralda, from now on we would like you to dine with us in our dining room. Monsieur and I are very grateful for what you are doing and we wish you to be part of our family.”

“Thank you, Madame. That is very kind of you,” said Kick.

“Thank you Esmeralda for introducing us to porridge. Monsieur and I both like it so it will be available at our breakfast buffet.”

“Thank you very much Madame,” replied Meldy.

After she left, Meldy had something to say. “But I like it in here. Amelie can come and talk to us. She can’t in there.”

“We know Meldy,” said Popster, “but we can still talk to her upstairs. She’ll still be our friend won’t she Kick.”

“Yes Meldy, she’ll understand and it would be rude to turn down Madame’s kind invitation.”

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Meldy and Sophie had also persuaded their respective sisters to help Raoul.

“We can take the carriage,” said Antoinette, “Marcel will soon be returning from father’s office.”

One hour later, she was with the twins heading towards Raoul’s house. Once they had located his address in a small crowded street, Antoinette knocked on the door.

“I am trying to contact Madame Delpierre,” she said, “do I have the right address?”

The woman looked confused and a bit worried.

“Yes, Mademoiselle, I am Madame Delpierre.”

“Madame, I have heard that your son Raoul was recently expelled from his choir.”

“Yes, Mademoiselle, that is correct. He said he spoke out of turn and....”

“Madame, both my mother and sister witnessed this incident and they think he has been unfairly treated. My mother is planning a musical event for Empire day and we were wondering if Raoul would like to sing for us.”

“Mademoiselle, you are so kind! Yes, I am sure he would.”

“My friends have already met him when he was with his Uncle delivering supplies. Could we assess his voice now in order to identify suitable pieces, or should we return at a more convenient time?”

Madame invited the three of them into her house. Raoul, who had been listening, emerged rather shyly.

“Hello again Raoul,” said Kick, “I will be playing the piano for you. Can you sing for us so we can choose something which will best suit your voice?”

“Of course Mademoiselle!” he eagerly replied. He sang some scales so Kick could get a feel for his range, then he sang a part that he had been rehearsing for his old choir. Antoinette and the twins were impressed so they invited him to attend some rehearsals at the Court Manteau’s house.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you,” said Antoinette, “the Princess and the Prince will be there.”

A surprised mother and son looked at each other.

“If the Princess likes your voice she might recommend you to the Royal Master of Music. That could mean a place in the Royal Chapel Choir. Would you like that Raoul?”

He was speechless. “Yes, he would!” declared his mother. “Thank you so much Mademoiselle.”

“Goodbye Madame,” said Popster, “our sister Esmeralda told us how Raoul had helped her and of course that helped us as well. Now we will do all we can to help him.”

“Thank you Mademoiselle, that is so kind of you. He is a good boy and I know he will not let you down.”

“I do not doubt that Madame,” replied Antoinette.

The three left Madame Delpierre’s house and Marcel drove them back home. The road was clogged with horse drawn traffic and progress was slow. The smell of horse manure was particularly strong and many flycatchers were flitting around enjoying their fly based feast. Soon the carriage came to a complete stop and Kick noticed some people waving placards nearby. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“Father said there is an industrial dispute. The workers at the Bureau de Sanitaire want to be paid more.”

“Do they have a good case?” asked Popster.

“Father thinks they do but any pay rise must be approved by the Assembly of Advisors and then cleared by the Emperor. The work they do is not pleasant but it is very important.”

As she spoke she was looking out of the window at the demonstrators. “They all look so young,” she added. “I think many of them should be at university but there are not enough places. They could become professionals but I know this job has to be done.”

Popster noticed she was looking sad and guessed who she was thinking of. Gently squeezing her hand she said, “I think you will soon see Antoine again.” There was an answering smile while she dabbed at her eyes.

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Raoul had arrived early for his first rehearsal so he went into the yard to find Sophie and Meldy. A freight wagon had made a delivery and they were soon enjoying themselves playing in the straw.

“Our neighbour is not working today,” said Raoul.

“Why not?” asked Meldy.

“They are on strike.”

“Strike, as in striking a match?” said Sophie. “We cannot do that here or the straw will burn!”

“They have stopped work because they want more money. He told me that horse manure is worth a lot and they should be paid more.”

“Shall we pick up those piles over there?” asked Meldy. “The horses weren’t here that long and look how much they left behind! On all those city streets there’ll be lots to pick up but what will happen if nobody does it?”

Amelie came to get Raoul and he was taken to the Grande Salle to rehearse his two songs. “You have bits of straw sticking out of your jacket!” laughed Antoinette.

Popster helped him clean up then they set to work. Madame appeared together with Sophie and Meldy and they sat at the opposite end of the room while he sang.

“Raoul! That was wonderful!” exclaimed Madame once he had finished. “I am so glad that we found you although, of course, I am sorry you were expelled from your choir. I am sure my friends will agree with me that you have talent. More people must hear you sing!”

“Thank you very much, Madame!”

Sophie and Meldy smiled because their plan was going to work.

To be continued