

Chapter 13 A Visit to the Palace Gardens

When the travellers arrived home, they were surprised to see two guards lounging around outside the house. These wanted to see their identity cards even though they must have known who they were.

“Why are you here?” asked Madame.

“Security. Orders of the Transitional Council,” said one between mouthfuls of food.

Once safely inside, Meldy and Sophie went to the stables. Georges, the stable boy, was cleaning out two of the stalls. He had already moved some old bits and pieces into the yard.

“Hello Georges,” said Sophie. “We have come back!”

“Hello Miss Sophie and Miss Esmeralda.”

“Georges, Will you sing again this evening?”

“I do not feel like singing. When Mademoiselle Antoinette returns home, then I will sing again.”

“Thank you Georges,” said Sophie. “My mother says she will come back soon.”

“That is good news Miss Sophie, then I will sing.”

“Why are you cleaning out these stalls?” asked Meldy.

“We are to have more horses, Miss Esmeralda, including the Emperor’s horse Diogenes. We must make room for them.”

“I saw a picture of him in the police station,” said Meldy.

“Also, we are to have another coachman,” continued Georges.

“But we have Marcel,” replied Sophie.

“Yes, Miss Sophie, but now we must have two.”

Meldy and Sophie left Georges to finish clearing out and walked along the stalls. Amandine the foal was still with her mother, Papillon.

"We can take them for a walk around the yard tomorrow," suggested Sophie.

"Yes, let's!" replied an enthusiastic Meldy.

That evening, in their attic room, the three sisters talked to Stephanie and Amelie.

"The palace gardens will open on Saturday afternoon," said Stephanie.
"Who would like to go?"

"Well, Patrice has to be there because she's the singer so I should stay here," said Kick.

"Of course, Esmeralda and Sophie should go," said Amelie. "I am on duty so Stephanie should go as well."

"How will you get there?" asked Kick.

"We can take the omnibus because the carriage could be stopped at a police checkpoint."

After Amelie and Stephanie had left, the sisters settled down for the night. Meldy could hear the horses in the stables and an owl hooted somewhere under the darkening sky. One of the horses took quite a while to settle down.

'Diogenes must be here,' she thought.

Next morning, at breakfast, the conversation turned to Antoinette and Princess Augustine.

"Monsieur thinks they are being held in the palace," said Madame.

"Why don't we find them and let them out?" suggested Meldy.

"It's not that easy Meldy," replied Popster.

"We could get a ladder and - and climb in when no one's looking." Meldy wasn't going to let it go.

"So we take a ladder on the bus and hide it while we go past the guards?" laughed Kick. "Anyway, we don't know where they are."

“Or a rope. We could throw it up and ...”

“Can you climb a rope?” interjected Popster.

“Old palaces have secret passages, don’t they?” asked Sophie.

“Yes!” cried Meldy. “We could get in that way.”

Madame and the twins looked at each other.

“Sophie, that might just be a possibility,” said Madame.

“Yes Madame but how could we find out? Who might know?” asked Popster.

“If there is a passage,” said Kick, “it could either lead to the river or to a nearby building which is not part of the palace.”

“You could go to the city library,” said Madame, “you might find out some useful information but please do not mention it to anyone!”

When Saturday afternoon came, Stephanie and Popster took Meldy and Sophie out to catch a bus. By now the guards knew them all so they didn’t bother with their identity cards. When asked, ‘Where are you going?’, they replied they wanted to visit St Peter’s Cathedral.

Fifteen minutes later, Amelie and Kick would do the same but they would be heading for the library.

The party of four walked to the nearest bus stop then caught the omnibus south towards the river. Two large blinkered horses plodded dutifully along in front and from their seat on top Meldy could watch the driver manipulating the reins.

‘Not very fast, is it?’ thought Popster as they slowly made their way through the other horse-drawn traffic. Ahead of them some vehicles were being stopped.

“It is a police road block,” whispered Stephanie.

Their bus waited in line until it was their turn to be inspected. The two officers, a man and a woman, checked down below then came upstairs.

Popster instantly recognised the woman. She had questioned them in the police station when they had first arrived weeks before. The four faced the front but could hear the two police officers steadily moving towards them. Finally, it was their turn.

“Identity cards, please,” said the woman. She didn’t look at Popster immediately, she just looked at the cards. Popster saw her expression change slightly. Of course it would. She had chosen the names Patrice and Esmeralda after they had been picked up on arrival in the Departement.

Popster felt her stomach muscles tighten and time seemed to stand still. The policewoman’s eyes flicked across from Stephanie to Sophie, then paused at Meldy. She had recognised her as well but Meldy seemed oblivious to any possibility of problems.

“Hello again!” she said. “Do you remember me?”

“Yes, of course, Esmeralda,” the policewoman replied.

Other passengers looked at them as if to ask, ‘Who are they and how do they know the police?’

Popster felt she had to add something. “I thought I recognised you,” she said.

“So you are still with the Court Manteau family?” she asked when she saw Sophie’s identity card.

“Yes, thank you for arranging it,” replied Popster, “they are so much nicer than that other lot.” There were whispers behind them. Now the passengers knew even more.

“Have a pleasant day,” said the woman as she left the top deck.

Popster’s mind worked furiously. The policewoman had not asked about her twin sister but she must have remembered that Popster had one. Why was that?

Popster had noticed the list in the policewoman’s hand, was it a list of suspects? Were they on some sort of list as well? She was so engrossed in her thoughts that she didn’t notice the bus had continued on its way.

“This is our stop,” said Stephanie. They herded Sophie and Meldy through the other passengers and off the bus. Only then did Popster tell Stephanie about the familiar policewoman.

“She interviewed us when we arrived, on the same day you were accidentally sent to our village.”

Stephanie looked around. No one was in earshot. “She did not ask about Catherine. She would surely have remembered her.”

“Yes. Esmeralda may have helped us by being open. It looked like we had nothing to hide. Anyway, she knew who we were and she knew we knew who she was.”

They took the river path to the Palace garden entrance. There were two guards checking identities at the gate.

“We didn’t think this through, did we?” whispered Popster.

“Ah. I see what you mean. We have brought Sophie and they will recognise the name ‘Court Manteau’. Will that make them suspicious?”

“Maybe we should come back next week without her.”

Meanwhile, Sophie and Meldy had skipped on ahead. They were almost at the gate and the guards had seen them. It was too late to turn back.

By now, Kick and Amelie had reached the city library which was a large building with a cavernous central hall. Bookshelf crowded rooms spread out in different directions with narrow corridors and steps to different levels.

Amelie asked the receptionist where they could find books on architecture then they followed the given instructions. Once in the right section, they chose some books from the shelves and started to read. The palace figured prominently as it proved to be of significant architectural interest.

Amelie read part of her chosen book to Kick. “The Royal Palace in the city of Londres has its origins in a medieval abbey, founded in the eleventh century. It was extensively rebuilt by the first Emperor Napoleon but many parts of the earlier building still exist.”

“Here, look at this,” replied Kick. “The medieval undercroft is still under the current building.” While Amelie and Kick studied a detailed drawing of the pillars and vaulted ceilings underneath the palace, someone else had walked into the room. This person then disappeared behind a bookshelf and started to examine one of the books.

“It also says,” continued Amelie, “the chapel was once part of the abbey church whose foundations still exist under the palace gardens.”

“The undercroft must very large,” said Kick, “but I can’t see any evidence of Sophie’s secret passage. I wonder what it’s used for now.”

“Storage most likely but it could be damp down there. Do you think...,” Amelie stopped when she noticed movement out of the corner of her eye. The same person walked past the table with a book, paused, then disappeared.

“They’ve gone. What were you going to say?” asked Popster.

“Could P.A. be in the undercroft?” whispered Amelie, “They could use it as a prison.”

Kick knew who P.A. was. While she made some notes, they could see some blue sky through a small window between the shelves so a walk by the river began to look very attractive. After returning the books, they left by the main entrance.

“Esmeralda! Sophie! Wait for us!” cried Stephanie.

“I’m so excited!” sang Meldy as she danced around. “I’ve never been in a palace garden before!”

“Identity cards!” said one of the guards. Stephanie and Popster produced there’s and there were two more for the younger members but the guards didn’t seem interested. They were obviously not seen as a threat.

Popster breathed a sigh of relief. ‘So far, so good,’ she thought as she looked around to orientate herself. She turned towards the River Couronne and led the others in that direction. She had heard the Princess’s rooms faced that way, which was south. Antoinette could also be in one of these, so if they took the riverside path they might have some chance of being seen.

Meldy skipped on ahead with Sophie while Stephanie and Popster talked as naturally as possible. Popster aimed furtive glances at the palace windows. Which ones were the most likely to provide the evidence they sought?

She was not certain but she thought she'd found a promising position. She gave Stephanie a signal, faced the palace and started to sing the first verse of the folk song which had been sung at the Empire Day musical evening.

Stephanie, who had not heard her sing before, listened appreciatively. Soon other visitors stopped to listen as well. It wasn't long before a guard was seen approaching. Popster finished, there was applause, then the audience melted away as the official came up. As he did so, Popster saw some white petals flutter down from one of the windows.

"We do not allow singing here!" he said in a rather aggressive tone.

"I am so sorry, Monsieur. I was overcome by the beauty of the gardens and I had to express my admiration in song!"

"Oh. Well, see you do not do it again. By the way, you do sing very well. I am sure that you can find some other place outside the gates."

"Thank you, Monsieur, for your kind words."

"Well, off you go!" he said as he motioned them to move on.

"I did not notice anything while you were singing," sighed Stephanie. "We will have to try something else."

"I did," whispered Popster. "I'll tell you later."

The group carried on round the gardens, looking at the flowers and the shrubs. There were pleasure boats on the river and some passengers were being given a talk by a tour guide.

"This is the palace where the corrupt Emperor and his parasitic children lived!" the voice said. "Now they have left our country the Transitional Council has, to the acclaim of the people, taken control. A new head of state, Monsieur Henri Court Manteau, has been appointed ..."

"That is my Papa!" cried Sophie.

"Shhh!" whispered Stephanie. "Do not say that here!"

"Why not?"

"We don't want to attract attention!" added Popster.

"But ..."

“Do you want some ice cream?” asked Popster in an attempt to distract them. It worked and they were soon strolling back to the entrance each enjoying their favourite flavour. When the next bus came, they sat on the top deck and then Popster saw Kick and Amelie standing at the next stop. ‘Wait for the next one!’ she thought as if she could communicate with her sister telepathically. Maybe it worked, because they turned away from the stop.

The twins travelling together would obviously attract too much attention.

Later, in their attic room, Kick told Popster about the medieval origins of the palace then Popster told her about their encounter with the police.

“I wonder why the woman didn’t mention me?” she asked.

“She knew there were three of us. Meldy blurted out ‘do you remember me?’ but I could already see she did.”

“She probably had a good reason for keeping quiet. I wonder what it was.”

“Something tells me we will soon find out,” said Popster. “Also, in the gardens, I sang the same song we performed at the musical evening. I definitely saw some white petals floating down from a window in the palace.”

“White petals? When the Princess came on Empire Day we had camellias because Madame said they are her favourite flower!”

“Of course!” exclaimed Popster.

“It was a signal,” concluded Kick. “They are being watched but a few petals might not have been noticed.”

“So they’re still in the palace?” asked Meldy.

“Yes Meldy, they must be. Oh, I forgot, I couldn’t see any sign of a secret passage.”

“Well it wouldn’t be a secret if you could read about it in a book!”

To be continued