

Chapter 16 The Princess Takes a Straw Ride

Meldy, Sophie, Raoul and Paul had discovered a secret passage into the Palace. Purely by chance they found Princess Augustine who was being held captive. They were able to lead her back to the ossuary but now two guards blocked their exit.

“We can’t stay down here for ever,” pointed out Popster. She was beginning to feel rather uncomfortable being stared at by all those empty eye sockets.

“Why not go,” said Princess Augustine. “You will only be in trouble if you are caught with me.”

“No,” said Kick. “That’s not an option. We have to get you out somehow. Meldy, where else did the passage lead?”

“It went right and left,” said Raoul. “But we only went right.”

“So let’s go left,” said Meldy.

“Yes,” said Popster, “what have we got to lose?”

They unlocked the door at the end and shone their remaining torches down the as yet unexplored passage. It stretched away into the distance.

“Come on,” said Kick. “Let’s go!”

“What do I do with the key?” asked Paul.

“Lock the door and give it to me,” said the Princess.

The door was locked and the seven walked off down the passage in single file. It was not as wide as the route to the Palace but the floor was firm and level. Eventually they turned to the right before carrying on.

“We could be getting close to the river,” said the Princess. “This must have been intended as an escape tunnel.”

“In case of revolution?” asked Popster.

“Like now,” she replied. “I wonder if it was ever used.”

“There are some stairs ahead,” said Paul. He shone his torch at what looked like a door at the top.

“That must be the way out!” whispered Kick.

Raoul went up and tried the handle. “I cannot move it!” he whispered.

“Come down and we’ll try,” said Kick. Both of them managed to grasp the handle but it stayed closed.

“Try the other way,” suggested the Princess. Still no luck.

Meldy shone her torch around the bottom of the stairs. There was a length of pipe lying in one of the corners. It was covered in cobwebs but still visible in the torchlight so the Princess saw it too.

“There is something down there. Try using it as a lever.”

Spiders scattered as Meldy gingerly picked up the pipe. She brushed off some of the cobwebs and handed it up to her sisters. It was large enough to fit over the handle and it gave them a lot more leverage.

“It’s moving!” cried Popster. They pushed on the door and it swung outwards until they could see daylight. They’d made it!

“Where are we?” asked the Princess from the bottom of the stairs.

Popster cautiously crept out and had a look around. “We’re inside some sort of monument or temple. There’s a statue in the middle and some large plaques on the walls. There’s columns at one side and I can see the river.”

“It is the memorial to the Grande Armee of Napoleon the First,” said the Princess. “He must have thought he might need an escape route.”

“Well his descendant did if he didn’t!” pointed out Kick.

“Quick!” said Popster. “There’s nobody around. Let’s get out of here.”

The other six climbed out of the door and Popster pushed it shut. Once closed, it looked just like all the other plaques. They brushed themselves off and walked as calmly as possible onto the riverside path.

A tour party stood a little way away with their backs to them, it looked like a group from the rural areas of the Departement being given a reward for their labours. A grubby collection of extra listeners attached themselves to the back. Kick and Popster had no idea what the guide was saying, they were just glad to be out of the dark cobweb filled passage. There was no sign of

any guards so the seven moles, still blinking in the brightness of the sun, found a private spot to plan their next move.

“Your Highness....” ventured Kick.

“Please, I am now a private citizen called Augustine.”

“For the moment maybe but we’ll hide you at the Court Manteau’s house. That’ll be alright won’t it Sophie?” Sophie nodded enthusiastically.

“But that could place them all in great danger,” pointed out the Princess.

“Maybe but it is the right thing to do isn’t it Popster?”

“Yes it is isn’t it Sophie. We have to hide Augustine and what better place is there?”

“You can stay in our room,” added Meldy, “it’ll be fun!”

“Then I accept,” replied the Princess. “We can work our way along the back streets but let us hope the police do not know I have escaped. Of course we must also ensure Raoul and Paul get home safely.”

“You are right, we can’t let them go back on their own,” said Popster. “So I’ll go with them and the girls. Kick, you look grubby enough to blend in with the Princess so you two stay together.”

That was how it all worked out. Kick and the Princess headed off down a side street while Popster took the younger members back to the nearest bus stop.

“Here is a rubbish bag,” said the Princess. “We will pretend to be cleaning the streets.”

They walked along a back road picking up pieces of litter on their way. Eventually they came to a supply depot with a large freight wagon waiting outside. It was piled high with straw.

“It looks like the same company that delivers to the Court Manteau’s stables,” said Kick. She had been wondering how to sneak in past the guards and this might just provide the solution. Soon, the driver appeared so Kick approached him.

“Please can you help us?” she asked, “we were out late and forgot our ID cards. Could you give us a ride home?”

“I did not think you looked like street cleaners.”

“Please?”

“I do not know, you see, if the police stop us I could be in trouble. I would like to help you but....”

Then another wagon pulled out of the gate. Kick looked at the driver and instantly recognised him as Raoul’s uncle Oskar. “It is alright, I’ll take them,” he said to the other driver who climbed on his wagon and drove off.

“I can make a detour and drop you off,” he said. They climbed up on the bench beside him and drove off round the corner. Once out of sight of the depot he stopped and suggested they should hide on top of his load. “I will climb up first and help you,” he said. “After all you have done for Raoul, it is the least I can do.”

“But Monsieur,” replied Kick, “you already helped us escape the Bourg family.”

“Mademoiselle,” he whispered as he gave them a hand up, “these are difficult times. Our country has been taken over by criminals....” Suddenly he stopped and looked quizzically at the Princess. “Of course we should be careful....”

“Monsieur,” said the Princess, “do many of your friends agree with your sentiments?”

“Mademoiselle, some are afraid to speak but many would act if they felt they could restore the Emperor. Things were changing for the better but now....”

“Thank you Monsieur,” she replied, “we are grateful for your loyalty to my father.”

“I do not... is it possible? Your Royal Highness?”

“Yes Monsieur,” said Kick, “now you see why we have to get to the Court Manteau’s house.”

“Of course! Anything I can do, you can rely on me. Now, I will place some bundles on top so you cannot be seen.” After he was satisfied, he climbed down and set off.

It was not long before they reached a police check point. The two secret passengers knew there was something wrong when the wagon ground to a halt and there were muffled voices. They held their breath. Surely the palace occupiers had noticed the Princess was missing by now? Next, they heard a creak from the frame directly behind the driver. Someone was climbing up to have a look.

‘If they find us,’ thought Kick, ‘I’ll be imprisoned as well. They can’t have me out there telling the truth.’ Then she heard Raoul’s Uncle Oskar.

“Officer! Is that the radio on your wagon?” The policeman, who had just started to poke around in the straw, clambered back down.

The fugitives waited with bated breath. ‘We’re moving!’ whispered Kick. They lurched and swayed for a while then, after half an hour, came to another stop. Kick gingerly pushed back two sheaves and peered out. She could see the top half of the Court Manteau’s house so Raoul’s uncle must have pulled the wagon up beside the garden wall. She could then hear him talking to the guards down below.

“I have got it wrong. I thought I was bringing a load here but I cannot find the correct paperwork.”

“You cannot deliver without that,” replied a guard. “Let us have a look.”

While the guards were occupied with the problematic paperwork, Kick groped around till she found the Princess’s arm. With a finger to her lips she pointed over to the wall. She had realised they could step off the top of the load while remaining invisible to the guards. The wall was wide enough to walk along and within a very short distance was Sophie and Meldy’s tree. This provided a safe route, via some branches, down into the garden.

“What a pity we can’t say goodbye,” said Kick.

“I will not forget his help,” replied the Princess. “The time will come when he can be rewarded.”

They walked round behind the stables then back through the yard. There was no one there so they made it to the house unseen. Kick took the Princess up the grand staircase only to meet Amelie coming down.

“Catherine! Where have you been?” she asked. “Patrice and the girls came back an hour ago.” She looked at the Princess but did not recognise her.

“This is, er, Veronique. We have had quite an adventure. I’ll tell you about it later.”

Kick and the Princess went to the attic in order to clean up. Popster and Meldy were already there.

“You made it! We were so worried,” said Popster.

Meldy had noticed a few bits sticking to their clothing so she said, “It looks like you’ve had a hay ride!”

“Not a hay ride Meldy, a straw ride. We’ll tell you all about it later.”

Afterwards, in their attic room, the sisters and the Princess talked about their day. “I still cannot believe I am free,” she sighed.

“What a lucky break it was,” said Kick. “We would have been in real trouble if the door in the memorial had stuck. The Royal Chapel might still have been guarded or even locked up for days and then what would we have done?”

“Don’t forget us,” added Meldy, “we found her!”

“Yes, Esmeralda, that was very brave of you to go down the passage like that, and luckily you found the right room. I was not often in there.”

“Augustine, what was that nasty woman shouting at you for?”

“She wanted me to sign away my right of succession. That would mean that I could never take over from my father and become Empress.”

“Well I’m glad you didn’t sign but they said they’d stop feeding you.”

“Is that true?” asked Kick.

“Yes it is. This time I really thought they meant it. So thank you Esmeralda, or may I call you Meldy?”

“Yes please!” cried Meldy, “that would be wonderful!”

“Well done Meldy,” said Popster, “Of course we mustn’t forget Sophie, Raoul and Paul.”

“Of course,” said Augustine.

“Augustine,” said Meldy, “Diogenes is in the stables.”

“Diogenes? Here? I must go and see him tomorrow.”

“Can you ride him?”

“Not yet, Meldy. He is my father’s horse but he does not mind me. I will spend more time with him and then we shall see.”

“Augustine,” asked Kick, “do you know where Antoinette is?”

“I have not seen her for some time. We were together when they first broke into the palace and I have often wondered where she was taken.”

“Augustine,” said Popster, “by now the regime will know you are missing. They will be looking for you.”

“But they cannot advertise the fact can they,” she replied. “You said they claimed I was in France. If they then say I am here, they will be exposed as liars.”

“We should tell Monsieur Court Manteau you have escaped,” said Kick. “He will know what to do.”

“I heard they made him head of state,” said Augustine.

“Yes, but he really had no choice,” said Popster. “To say no could have meant prison and possibly endangered Antoinette. I know he secretly accepted your father as the real head of state.”

“Yes, I am sure you are right. Somehow we need to free him as well as Antoinette.”

“Yes, but how?” asked Kick.

“Also,” mused Popster, “we need to publicise their lies. They said your family had all left so they had to step in for the good of the country. Their legitimacy is built on that lie. As you didn’t leave then logically they must be illegitimate.”

“So,” asked Kick, “what do we do next?”

To be continued