

Chapter 21 The Princess Takes a Chance

The student marchers had met the protestors from the countryside and they had walked together to the square outside the Chamber of Advisors. The Emperor had spoken to the demonstrators and had invited representatives of the Transitional Council to come out in order to tell their story. No one came as they were, at that moment, escaping through a rear window.

While this was happening, a drama was unfolding at the Court Manteau residence. Marcel had driven Monsieur Court Manteau to talk to his staff at the Bureau de Sanitaire while Alain had insisted some trusted students should come into the courtyard in order to help guard the Princess.

They came but did not remain for long. Francois had told them they were not needed so they reluctantly went back to the student encampment across the road. At the same time, Princess Augustine walked out of the back door of the house with Meldy and Sophie. Together, they went across the yard to the stables then the girls carried on to the garden. The Princess had noticed the lack of student guards and there was also no sign of the policeman. She saw Francois over by the coach house and he was watching her. Something in his manner told her to be wary.

‘I need an escape plan,’ she thought. There was Diogenes in his stall. She had never ridden him because he had always been her father’s horse. When she first arrived at the Court Manteau’s, he had seemed uneasy in her presence but she had now, she hoped, won him over.

She walked down to the tack store and picked out a suitable saddle. Georges appeared and offered to help. She trusted him so she put a finger to her lips to signal silence and together they carried the equipment back to Diogenes. Then they heard Francois approaching.

“Keep him out of the way if you can,” she whispered. A brief questioning look before he left to do his best. She could hear them talking about one of the carriages and she assumed they had crossed the yard to have a look.

Outside, on the road, a large four horse furniture wagon had stopped beside the garden wall. Two police watched as the driver seemed to be adjusting the harnesses. What they could not see, hidden behind the large box like wagon, should have encouraged them to investigate further.

Meldy and Sophie saw four men appear on top of the wall. They quickly turned, pulled up their ropes and slid down into the garden. Frightened, the girls ran round to the stables to warn the Princess.

“Go into the loft,” she whispered. “Keep quiet, the policeman is not here! I am taking Diogenes!” Unbeknown to her, this particular policeman was sleeping under a bush in the garden because had been drugged.

She is hoping she can ride him at the first attempt. The saddle goes on, he is not too happy about it but he settles down. ‘How will he react when I try to ride him?’ she thinks.

She unbolts his stall and leads him outside. There is Francois, heading for the exit, obviously planning to block her escape route. She can see no sign of Georges but then hears the sound of men running through the passage from the garden. Time to go.

She jumps into the saddle. ‘Big beautiful horse,’ she thinks. He squirms but then relaxes, awaiting her command. She gives it and he gallops off across the yard towards the entrance, hooves clattering on the cobbles.

“Grab her!” shouts one of the men behind. Francois is in her way. What will Diogenes do? She goads him on. At that precise moment Amelie, who she has not noticed before, shouts “Traitor!” He turns expecting a physical attack from his right side and is immediately knocked to the ground by Diogenes. Horse and rider pass unopposed into the street. “Four kidnappers in yard,” she calls to the police. “Francois their accomplice. Children hiding in loft above stables. I go to square.” She gallops off.

She rides down roads, past horse drawn wagons and buses, then through a police check point. They are not interested in her. Some people stare, Diogenes is a very distinctive horse after all. On arriving in the square, she rides through the crowd to the steps. People move aside to let her pass, some curious and others recognising her or the horse. Climbing down, she turns to the crowd. A figure in old tweeds and a cap comes towards her but she does not recognise him. Suddenly she cries out, “Father!”

The crowd cheers as they embrace. She wants to speak, but, overcome with emotion, no words can be found. Alain comes up the steps with Kick, Popster and Stephanie.

He turns to the crowd. “My friends,” he says, “The Emperor and his daughter, Princess Augustine, are now free. He added, to rousing cheers, “the Transitional Council have fled.”

Monsieur Court Manteau, at the Bureau de Sanitaire, had heard the Emperor was outside the Chamber of Advisors. Marcel drove him, together with four

trusted employees, to the square but they had to walk the last bit because of the crowds. Once there, he climbed the steps and saw father and daughter embracing. Alain had just finished speaking.

Monsieur turned to the crowd. "I was pressured," he said, "by the Transitional Council to become head of state. I was told this was necessary because the royal family had left for France. In truth they were being held captive in the palace by a gang of criminals."

He continued, "they were threatened and bullied but refused to sign away their rights. My youngest daughter, together with her friends, heard them threatening to starve Princess Augustine into submission. 'Sign or you will starve,' they heard. How did she respond? 'Then I will starve.' 'Then I will starve.' They have tried to portray her as spoilt and self obsessed, this is obviously untrue. Only a person of great courage would accept that fate, a slow and painful death, rather than bow to their cruel and brutal threats."

He concluded, "the legitimate authority in our country never left. I am ready to serve our Emperor in any way he sees fit."

There were cheers and applause. Princess Augustine had found her voice so she spoke next.

"Thank you Monsieur Court Manteau. You have heard how my father and I were held in captivity but now we must look to the future. A future where better relations with England and open borders will be an early priority."

She continued, "My father has indicated a hardship fund will be set up so no farmer will have to sell his or her land. The Transitional Council did, however, have one good idea. Part of the palace will be turned into a museum assuming the occupiers have departed empty handed."

She concluded, "their support is vanishing as I speak. We thank you for being here today and for showing your opposition to their illegal regime."

While she was speaking, border police at Douvres were watching travellers boarding a ferry for France. One passenger caught their eye, a small man carrying two large heavy suitcases. So heavy, in fact, he could hardly manage them.

They stopped him and asked some questions. He tried to make a dash for it but they grabbed him. Once inside the departure shed they opened the cases and were dazzled by the contents.

"Look at this lot!" said the inspector. "Bet I know where it came from."

A colleague said, “we had better keep a look out. There could be a lot more like him. You my friend,” he said to the crestfallen man, “will be sent to prison.” His loot would be going back to the palace.

A new Assembly of Advisors had to be formed. Monsieur Court Manteau and Professor Lecomte from the university agreed to join, the latter would act as a scientific advisor to the government. The Professor was glad to be back in his comfortable office while Albert Camion, appointed by the Transitional Council to oversee the Professor’s work, had vanished.

Antoine Court Manteau had arrived at the border to the Departement de Londres and was told, although the old laws were still in place, they would not now be enforced. This meant he was free to enter and go to his home. One hour later, Antoinette and the twins were practising for the next musical evening when he just appeared in the doorway.

“Sounds very good!” he said. Antoinette jumped up and embraced her brother while the twins, realising who he was, crept out of the room to give them space. Next, Sophie was also greeting her brother.

‘Well,’ thought Kick as they climbed the stairs, ‘they won’t need us....’

“Where are you two going?” asked Antoine in a friendly tone from below. “After all you have done for the family and the country, I do not think I can allow you to disappear just like that!”

They turned to look back down. He was reaching out to them. “Come,” he said, “ your place is here because you are part of our family.”

Meldy had appeared from the garden and was looking up at her sisters, waiting for a signal from them. “Alright,” said Kick, “if you’re sure we won’t be in the way....”

“In the way? If it was not for you three, I would probably be languishing in a prison somewhere!”

“Well we wouldn’t want that would we!” laughed Popster.

One week after the demonstration, Madame Court Manteau held her musical evening and the guests of honour included the Emperor and Princess Augustine. A number of the attendees were to be rewarded for their role in freeing them.

The Royal Chapel Choir, reformed at short notice, performed for the guests. Raoul and Paul were excited to be back with their friends and were able to sing solos thanks to Kick's extra rehearsals. Later, she was happy to listen to Antoinette singing while Antoine played the piano.

'It is just as it should be,' she thought, 'he's better than me.' Popster didn't agree, she said later that her sister was just as good as Antoine. Meldy thought so too.

After the applause had subsided, Antoine and Antoinette looked at each other as if on some prearranged signal. They walked over to the twins, took them by the hand, then led them back to the piano. Antoinette whispered a request to Popster. They should sing the duet which they had sung together when they had first met and Kick was to play for them. Antoine took a seat in the audience and encouraged them with his applause.

Kick looked at the music which was already open at the right page but her eyes filled with tears. She took some deep breaths, composed herself then glanced at Antoinette and Popster who were both looking back at her. Antoinette was mouthing the words 'thank you.' Popster hugged Antoinette and gave her sister a signal. "We're ready," it said. Ready they were, the song could not have been better.

The main event of the evening was the award of the honours and medals. The Emperor made a speech then the first names were called.

"Raoul Delpierre, Paul Lebrun, Sophie Court Manteau and Esmeralda Wagley: please come forward."

The children came, bowed or curtsied. The Princess smiled. Meldy's curtsies still needed improvement.

"For extraordinary bravery in rescuing Princess Augustine from her imprisonment, the Order of Louis Napoleon the Second with Laurel Leaves."

The children bowed their heads in turn as the red white and blue ribbons attached to the impressive looking medals were placed around their necks. The Emperor murmured a few words of thanks and shook them each by the hand. The Princess hugged them all. The boys blushed but did not complain.

“Catherine and Patrice Wagley: please come forward.”

They came forward and curtseyed.

“For bravery in assisting in the rescue of Princess Augustine, the Order of Louis Napoleon the Second with Laurel leaves.”

The Emperor had a few words with them. He praised their musical abilities and thanked them for interrupting their visit in order to get involved in local politics. He was unaware they were not from the England just across the border.

“Sylvie Colbert, Oskar Delpierre, Amelie Lanoe, Georges Leclerc, Marcel Maupassant and Stephanie Saintclaire: please come forward.”

Sylvie, Amelie, Georges, Marcel and Stephanie, you put yourself in danger when you faced determined attempts to kidnap Princess Augustine. The kidnappers, thanks to your efforts and those of the police, are now in custody. Oskar, you transported my daughter across the city at great risk to yourself and your discretion proved invaluable when you took me to a secret location in the country. Stephanie, you accurately assessed a dangerous situation and cycled to the university for help as well as fighting off kidnappers. You are all awarded the order of Louis Napoleon the Fifth. In addition to this, Stephanie Saintclaire, you will be offered a scholarship to study at the university.”

The twins saw Stephanie’s reaction. First the surprise then the joy filled emotion of realising her potential could now be realised.

Other awards included medals for the police team who rescued the Emperor. Captain Duplessis, now promoted to Commissioner Duplessis, merited special mention. Although injured, she had now recovered. She was also to have a seat on the Assembly of Advisors.

That night, in their attic room, the Wagley sisters sat with Stephanie and Amelie.

“Amelie,” said Popster, “We’re so glad you were rewarded and thank you for all your help over the last few weeks.”

Meldy hugged her. “You should have seen her hitting Francois!”

“Oh, I did nothing,” she replied with characteristic modesty. “I am so glad that you, my good friends, all did so well.

“You are a really special person Amelie,” added Kick as Amelie wiped away a tear.

“What will you study Stephanie?” asked Popster.

“I still cannot believe it. I have always wanted to be a teacher,” she replied, “I will teach at the first level.”

“You’ll be brilliant!” enthused Meldy.

“First level must mean primary,” pointed out Popster.

“Yes. Up to age eleven.”

“Will you come and teach me?” asked Meldy.

“When I am qualified, you will be too old,” she laughed.

“Did you hear that Raoul’s uncle Oskar will now be in charge of his supply depot?” asked Popster.

“That’s really good news,” said Kick. “His quick thinking saved the Princess from being re arrested.”

“You didn’t tell us that!” replied Popster.

“And he got us away from the Bourgs!” added Meldy.

“So we all owe him then!” laughed Kick.

Eventually, Stephanie and Amelie left to get some rest. They had to rise early because the Emperor and the Princess were both staying with them.

Meldy could hear a police patrol in the yard and some horses snorting in the stables. An owl hooted and a nightingale started up in a thicket behind the coach house. She heard someone singing out in the stables and knew at once it was Georges. Next thing she knew it was morning.

To be continued