

Chapter 2 What is a Pantomime?

Baron Bruno von Kühlschrank was wondering where the Wagley sisters had gone. He knew they had visited the Departement de Londres twice before returning home. But where exactly was this home of theirs? Was it really in another world or was it just in some far off land?

‘They must have got back safely the first time otherwise they could not have returned,’ he mused, ‘did they get home safely for a second time?’

He had stood on the edge of the Place de Napoleon and watched them leave. They had literally vanished in an instant. Was it dematerialisation or was it somehow due to them? He couldn’t believe they had the power to make themselves disappear but where had they gone?

‘They said they came from England but what if there are two Englands?’ he mused. ‘One exists across the border but where is the other? The Place de Napoleon holds the key. It must do. I saw where the sisters stood when they disappeared so what will happen if I stand there? Will I disappear as well?’

He decided he would wait on the same spot every morning until he found out. Then perhaps he could solve this mystery once and for all.

Now for three mornings, the Baron had stood by the statue of Napoleon. Nothing had happened apart from some questions from a curious dog walker. Next time he took a sketch pad and tried to draw the statue. Soon he was asked why he returned so regularly.

“Monsieur, I am seeking perfection in my art,” he had replied.

“But why are you always on the same spot?”

“It is the light Monsieur.”

On the sixth morning he was back again. The square was deserted except for a cat prowling around in the undergrowth.

“Keep away from me little cat,” he said. “Who knows where we will both go if you get too close.”

Who indeed. He watched as it warily skirted round him. What was it thinking? What did it think when he vanished in an instant?

He opened his eyes and yawned. Looking around, all he could see were trees. Lots of trees.

‘Ah,’ he thought, ‘I have been on a journey. But, where exactly am I?’ There was nothing for it but to start walking. He passed an old quarry and took a path down past some more trees until all he could see were fields.

‘No sign of life,’ he thought so he turned and walked up and over a hill until he came to a lane.

‘Ah, there are houses. This looks like a village.’

He walked down the lane looking at each house but, unlike in some countries, there were no family names on the gates. On he went to the centre which was deserted.

‘Where is everyone?’ he thought as he sat on a seat on the green. After the bustle of Londres this place was very quiet. Looking around, he saw a notice board so he wandered over to have a look.

‘So, I am somewhere called Wood Tofton and the notices are all in English.’ One in particular caught his eye.

‘Snow White and the Island of Treasure. Rehearsals on Sunday afternoon at 2pm.’ He was puzzled. ‘What on earth is a Snow White and where is this island of treasure?’

“Morning mate,” said a man behind him.

“Ah, and a very good morning to you,” he replied.

“Not from around here are you.”

“No, I am sorry to say I am not. Actually, I am a bit lost.”

“You look hungry.”

“Yes, I must admit I am.”

“Follow me. Dot’ll fix you up.” The Baron followed his new friend to a cafe round the corner.

“Dot, this gentleman’s hungry and he’s lost. I think he could do with a full English.”

“What, may I ask, is a full English?”

“You’ll love it mate. Everyone comes in for one.”

The Baron looked around. Obviously the everyone referred to had not yet put in an appearance. He took a seat but his new friend had to go.

“See you around,” he said as he left.

“I am afraid I do not have any money at present,” he confessed.

“Now don’t you worry love. We’ve all been there, I know I have. A fine gentleman like yourself and all, you’ll pay me later I know you will.”

“That is very kind of you, Miss Dot.”

“Where you from?” she asked, “not from round here, are you.”

“I come from a very small European country.”

“Train or plane?”

“I am sorry, I do not understand.”

“Did you fly here?”

“Oh yes,” he replied. At least he was not telling a lie. He did not want to do that but he could hardly tell her the truth.

He stayed in his corner while people came and went. Some said ‘morning’, some nodded in his direction while others ignored him. He finished his breakfast, drank his coffee and eventually got up to leave.

“Miss Dot, I will not forget your kindness,” he said as he bowed. “I will return to pay what I owe. Thank you again.”

Virtually everyone in the cafe watched him leave. They wondered who he was but only one person actually asked Dot the question.

“That,” she replied with a sigh, “was a real gent. That’s who that was.”

Outside and uncertain where to go next, he walked past what looked like a community hall.

“There you are!” cried a woman as she ran after him. “I’m so glad you’re early.”

“Yes, here I am and I might be a bit early too, all things considered.”

“Come in. We’re still getting set up. I’m Tansie by the way.”

“I am, er, I am Bruno.”

“You have the accent down to perfection. Yes, you will do very nicely!”

“The accent, yes. I was born with it.”

He was too polite to protest so he followed her into the hall. He soon realised there was to be some sort of play and he was meant to be in it. There was no scenery but the stage lights were on.

“Have some cake,” said Tansie. He had some cake.

“This is my niece Terpsichore,” she said, “she’s American and she’s studying over here.” He turned to see a woman just a few years younger than him.

“Er, Miss Terpsichore, how do you do?” he asked as he bowed. “It is an honour to make your acquaintance. My name is Bruno.”

“Hi Bruno,” she replied, “I just love those old fashioned manners. You’ll be great, you’re perfect for the part.”

“Do you think I should not be so old fashioned?”

“No I don’t. These days good manners are so rare. Can you sing?”

“I think so, yes.” But what, he wondered, was a pantomime? His mind raced through the options. ‘Panto, Pants, Trousers. Mime, no speaking, just actions. So is it something to do with trousers and miming? Then why did she ask if I could sing?’

“Terpsichore,” said Tansie, “will be playing Snow White so you will be taking her prisoner. Her helpers will be played by three of our local children. We did want some more but as yet we haven’t had any takers.”

“Ha ha!” laughed Terpsichore, “Snow White and the three little helpers. Well, it is pantomime so anything goes.”

“Yes, of course,” replied the Baron, “it is pantomime.” He was still wondering what it was and where this anything was going.

“The others will be here soon,” said Tansie. “Ah. Here are the Wagley sisters!”

Meldy was first to enter while her identical twin sisters Kick and Popster ambled in behind checking their phones. Meldy saw the Baron and stopped dead in her tracks.

“Baron von Kühlschrank!” she cried.

The twins looked up from their screens. They too stopped dead in their tracks.

“Baron von Kühlschrank!” they chorused.

“Lady Esmeralda, what a pleasant surprise!” He was about to greet the twins in similar fashion but something subtle in their expressions prompted a quick reversal.

“Catherine and Patrice, once again a pleasant surprise.”

He noticed their relieved expressions. It was evident they wished to keep their titles secret.

Tansie and Terpsichore had adopted expressions of amazement.

“You are a Baron?” asked Tansie.

“And Meldy Wagley a Lady?” enquired Terpsichore.

“Yes Cory,” said her aunt. “Meldy provided a valuable service to European royalty you know.”

“Wow, I am impressed. Which family was that?”

“Oh,” replied Tansie, “confidentiality is so important in these matters. You just cannot be too careful these days.”

“But,” asked Terpsichore, “if you’re a Baron then I guess you’re not here to be in our panto.”

The Baron looked from her to the Wagley sisters. All their expressions were saying the same thing. He knew what they wanted him to say.

“I would be honoured to be included,” he said as he bowed. “If that is agreeable to you.” He would do this panto thing, whatever it was. It could not be that bad, could it?