

Chapter 6 The Rescue

Somewhere south of the City of Londres, Madame Francine Court Manteau was relaxing on her favourite sofa. From this comfortable position she was able to see through a large window at the other end of the room. In the distance, beyond their ornamental gardens, there was parkland and behind that a forest. She could just make out a small figure making its way along the distant tree line.

‘That will be Madame Audran,’ she thought to herself as she turned to her mail. ‘She will be looking for mushrooms again,’ she decided as she opened her first letter. It was from her niece Sophie.

‘Dear Tante Franci,’ she read, ‘I hope you are well because I am and it is not nice when one is well and someone else is not. Antoinette is with the Empress again and Pappa is at his office. I am feeling lonely today but I will not be lonely for long because my special friend Meldy is coming to visit. I am hoping she will bring Nicky with her so that our gang can all be together again. Can we come to visit you? I do hope we can because they have not seen your wonderful house and I am sure they would like it as much as I do if they could only visit you. I hope so much to see you again soon, your niece Sophie.’

Sophie’s aunt smiled to herself as she lay back on the sofa. She had a soft spot for Sophie and her sister in law, Sophie’s mother, had told her all about her friend.

“They get into scrapes together,” she had said, “but it is worth it just to see the transformation in Sophie. She is a different person when Esmeralda is with us.”

Francine’s son Alain was really busy at the university and he didn’t visit as often as she would have liked. Now she had the option of some lively young visitors, in fact a whole gang of them. She did not hesitate. Moving over to her desk she penned a reply.

‘Dear Sophie, I was so pleased to get your nice letter. Yes, I am well and so is your Uncle Benedict. He is out at the moment but I know he will be happy for me to invite you. So do please come to visit and bring your friends, we look forward to seeing you all at the earliest opportunity. Lots of love, your Tante Franci.’

She folded the sheet of notepaper, put it in an envelope and wrote, ‘Sophie Court Manteau, Court Manteau Residence, Rue des Arbres, Cite de Londres.’ She rang the bell and a staff member appeared.

“Sylvie, please could you post this. We are to have visitors, Sophie is coming with some friends. Can you make sure two rooms are made ready?”

“Of course, Madame,” she replied with the broadest of smiles. Sophie was also a favourite of hers and she had heard a lot about her friends. “Who will bring them Madame? Will we need an extra room for her?”

“Of course Sylvie, as ever you have thought of everything. It is best to be on the safe side. It could be Amelie.”

“Well Madame, whoever comes will be made very welcome.”

“Thank you Sylvie. By the way, how is the new maid working out?”

“Delphine? She is alright I suppose but Madame I do not think she is a fast learner.”

“I know you will be patient with her. We are so lucky to have you Sylvie, not many have your high standards.”

“Thank you Madame,” replied Sylvie as she left to make things ready for the visitors.

When Benedict Court Manteau returned his wife told him about the impending visit. “So Esmeralda is coming? Excellent. I have heard good things about her from my brother. When their gang got together, they provided him with much amusement. The trick they played on Madame du Malcontent and her followers had him in stitches.”

“Which one was that?”

“You remember, the measles trick with the red pen. Those spots really fooled them.”

“Oh yes, now I remember. Hopefully those awful sisters are safely locked away.”

“Oh, I am sure of that my dear.” He did not want to tell her about the rumours he had recently heard: a third sister, Mathilde du Malcontent, had recently escaped from a prison somewhere on the continent. Rumour had it she was the most evil of the lot.

After a hearty breakfast at Dot's cafe, Raoul and Paul had hoped to sneak into Nicky's tree house, assuming they could find it without their map. However, they had had an unexpected surprise.

"Master Raoul and Master Paul," said a familiar voice, "a good morning to you both. Welcome to Wood Tofton but to what do we owe the pleasure of your company?"

"Baron von Kùhlschrank!" they chorused.

"And where is Miss Sophie?" he asked looking round the room.

"Er," replied Paul, "she is at her house."

"Good morning Sir," said Dot as she came out to meet the Baron. "We found these two outside and they looked so pathetic, poor lambs, we couldn't just send them on their way."

"Thank you so much, Miss Dot. That was very kind of you but then that is, as I have learnt, your nature is it not? I will see they are well looked after."

Once they were ready, the Baron took them to the village green.

"Now let us have a talk. I know you two well enough to guess something is, as they say, afoot. Tell me, why are you here?"

"Er, um," started Paul.

"We were in Sophie's garden," said Raoul, "and we talked and... we said why not visit Meldy and Nicky?"

"You are aware that a visit here requires a certain amount of knowledge and planning. I am very surprised, and I must admit impressed, that you managed to discover, shall we say, certain secrets."

The boys sat sheepishly silent.

"I have concluded that you are planning one of your adventures. Is the Empress in danger? Have the evil du Malcontent sisters escaped from prison?"

"Honest Monsieur Le Baron," replied Paul, "we just want to see Meldy and Nicky."

“In order, no doubt, to include them in your... adventure. Ah. I see from your expressions I am very close to the truth. Now, what sort of adventure could it be?”

Once again the boys were silent.

“I had an adventure with your friends yesterday. We went round Master Daniel’s garden with his new metal detector. But you will not be familiar with one of these I think. They are very useful when one goes looking for... treasure.”

The boys darted each other a look. The sort of look that spoke volumes.

“So, you are planning a treasure hunt. Now we are getting there. Also, you will need somewhere to stay and of course the parents of your friends will be very suspicious as soon as they see you.”

“Suspicious?” chorused the boys.

“Yes, suspicious. They will realise straight away you wish to take their children away to you know where. That is your intention, is it not?”

“Er...” mumbled Paul. Raoul said nothing.

“They know all about the Departement de Londres. Meldy has been twice and Nicky once. Also, they will know exactly what you are up to so will do their best to stop them going with you. Now I will take you back to Dot’s and then I will try to smooth the troubled waters. Let us hope they will be pleased to see you.”

The boys were left at Dot’s cafe while the Baron strode off to talk to their friend’s parents. He spoke to Nicky’s family first.

“I wish to alert you to a possible problem. Two friends of Nicky and Meldy have arrived from the parallel world and I think they will try to take them away when they leave.”

“Oh no,” sighed Mrs Berrington, “I had this feeling, call it intuition, that something like this was going to happen.”

“When will they try to leave? Do you know?” asked Mr Berrington.

“I suspect it will be next weekend.”

“Thank you for warning us,” he replied, “we can always lock him in his tree house I suppose.”

“That wouldn’t stop him,” laughed his wife, “you know what they’re like. When those two get together...”

‘Yes,’ thought the Baron, ‘when those two plus the other two got together a whole nation was grateful.’ He bowed, said his goodbyes, then left to have a similar conversation with Meldy’s parents. Later, all the parents got together.

“So we have a few days yet,” said Mr Wagley. “You all heard what he said. They’re planning to go on a treasure hunt but they won’t leave until the weekend.”

“What if he’s wrong?” asked his wife. “I think we need to take action now.”

“What do you suggest?” asked Mrs Berrington.

“Lock them up?” laughed her husband.

“They’d jump out of the window!” laughed Mr Wagley.

“I think we should talk to them,” suggested his wife. “Appeal to their better natures.”

“Are you kidding?” said Mr Berrington. “Give them half a chance and they’ll be off!”

“What about grounding each one on alternate days?” said Mrs Berrington, “Neither one will leave without the other. Those two are inseparable!”

“Great idea,” they all agreed. Of course, Meldy and Nicky did not.

Daniel was excited. His birthday seemed to last for ever! His mother had even invited Paul and Raoul to share his room. She was pleased to see how cheerful he became when he was in their company. Nicky, however, was not able to meet up with them because he was confined to his room. The parents had drawn lots and his number came up.

“It’s not fair!” he had protested in vain.

“It’s for your own good,” they had replied. Obviously, he did not see it that way.

Later Daniel, Meldy and the two newcomers were playing together when Meldy had an idea.

“We can get him out. I know where there’s a ladder.”

“How big is it?” asked Raoul.

“Let’s go look,” suggested Meldy. “You said the Gateway opens soon so we have to be up there.”

The gang slunk out of Daniel’s garden, through Meldy’s and into Nicky’s domain. His treehouse loomed over them as they crept towards Mr Berrington’s shed.

“We could be hiding up there,” pointed out Paul, “if you had not lost the map.”

“I said I am sorry,” replied Raoul, “I did not do it on purpose.”

“Shhhh!” whispered Meldy, “someone’s coming.”

The children ducked down behind a flower bed while Mr Berrington walked past. He stood and looked up at a first floor window, shook his head then left.

“That’s Nicky’s room!” whispered Daniel. Sure enough, a sad little face was gazing out of the window. It brightened when it saw his gang members. They waved, pointed to the shed, then disappeared. Soon they reappeared tottering under the weight of a large metal ladder. They struggled across the lawn with their burden and made several vain attempts to put it up against the wall next to Nicky’s window. It was so heavy they couldn’t raise it much above lawn level. They huffed and puffed but without success.

“Is there a shorter one?” asked Daniel. “This one’s too long.”

“I didn’t see one,” replied Meldy. “I know, why don’t you go in and let him out? They trust you.”

“Why don’t you?” he suggested.

“They think I’m a trouble maker,” she replied. “I’m not really. I look after him ‘cos he was really sick once. He nearly died.”

“He does not look sick now,” said Paul as he waved enthusiastically to the prisoner.

Nicky waved back with equal enthusiasm. He was mouthing the words, ‘get me out of here!’

“I know,” said Daniel, “you make a noise with the ladder and I’ll go in the house when they come out.”

“Brilliant!” exclaimed Meldy as she turned to position herself better. Unfortunately she had forgotten where the ladder was and tripped over it with a shriek. She had hurt her ankle.

“Hide!” whispered the boys as they ran for cover. Meldy was left where she was.

“Quick!” hissed Daniel. Before she had the chance Mrs Berrington appeared and saw her struggling to her feet.

“Meldy!” she cried, “What on earth are you doing with that ladder?”

“Nicky looked sad and I thought....”

“Meldy. You did not move that heavy thing all by yourself. Where are the others?” Here she looked around but could not see Meldy’s little helpers. Unbeknown to her, one of the ‘others’ was moving stealthily round to the open front door while the other two were hiding in the bushes.

“My ankle hurts!” Even as she was whining she was feeling guilty because she liked Nicky’s mother and knew what she was doing was not right. She also knew there was no other way. After all, that treasure had to be found and Nicky was now the only gang member who was unaware of its existence.

“Come on, I’ll help you stand up. Nicky’s father can put the ladder away. I don’t know what we’ll do with you but anyway you’ll be confined to your room tomorrow!”

‘Oh no I won’t!’ thought Meldy.

Daniel is already in the house. Past Mr Berrington’s study he creeps to be startled by a ringing phone. Luckily the occupant’s attention is distracted so he is not seen. He carefully ascends the stairs wondering if any of the steps

will creak. They don't so again he is not heard. There is Nicky's door in front of him with key in lock. A quick turn and he is out.

"Treasure hunt!" whispers Daniel. Nicky's eyes widen with excitement. They creep back downstairs and manage to pass the open study door unseen. Someone is approaching the front door. Nicky gestures to the dining room and they hide in there.

Mrs Berrington enters the study and says to her husband, "they tried to put a ladder up outside!"

"The little monkeys!" he laughs. "Is he still in his room?"

"We'd better check," she replies. Up the stairs they race to be confronted with an open door but no Nicky. By this time the two boys are racing across the lawn to join their friends.

"Nicky! Come back at once!" shouts his father from an open window. Nicky falters but hears encouraging sounds coming from the bushes.

"Nicky," hisses Meldy, "you're for it now but you can't be in any more trouble if you come with us!"

Nicky joins his friends. He knows Meldy is right. He was confined to his room for not going anywhere and once before he was confined to the same room for going somewhere. That somewhere was the parallel world. What was the difference? He could worm his way round them and they would eventually forgive him. He makes his decision.

"I'm coming!" he cries as he follows the others through the shrubbery into Meldy's garden.

"Shhhh!" hissed Paul from the front. "Meldy, it is your father!" They all stopped dead in their tracks. While waiting, they saw Nicky's parents and Meldy's mother appear. Now they were all talking. The five fugitives listened intently.

"They'll be heading for the tree in the woods," said Mr Wagley, "they must expect the gateway to be opening sooner than we thought. I'll ride up the track on my bike and head them off."

"Where's the Baron?" asked Mrs Wagley, "he may be able to help."

"He went off for a walk," replied Mrs Berrington, "we're not sure where."

“Is he a party to their plan do you think?” asked Mr Berrington.

“He can’t be,” replied his wife. “He didn’t have to warn us about the new arrivals.”

“You’re right,” said Mr Wagley. “I’m off up the lane, the rest of you search round here.”

“What do we do now?” whispered Meldy, “they’re blocking the route up to the woods.”

“We know another way,” said Raoul. “We got lost and came down past Miss Dot’s cafe.”

“That’s brilliant!” whispered Nicky, “We’ll go that way.”

“We must go into the village first,” said Paul.

“Now my mother’s there too,” said Daniel as he watched the remaining adults fanning out. “They’ll see us if we go into the lane.”

“Come on!” said Meldy, “Sophie’s waiting so we need to go now!”