

Through the Gateway

Chapter1 A Walk in the Woods

It was early morning in the village of Wood Tofton and there was some frenetic activity outside the Wagley family's house. Ladders and scaffolding were being dumped off the back of a truck and two wide awake men were rather loudly and annoyingly calling to each other. Inside the house there was no such activity, the parents with their three daughters had been sound asleep but now that blissful state was being rendered impossible.

Esmerelda Wagley, Meldy to her friends and the youngest daughter, was excited because this was the first day of the summer holiday. She had plans and lots of them. Her older twin sisters were exhausted after a term of relentless pressure to do their best so their dearest wish had been to have a lie in.

Kathleen, Kick to her friends, was annoyed. A pillow, pulled tightly over her head, failed to block out the noise so she sat up. Why did they have to come on this day of all days, in fact why did they have to come this month? She was especially annoyed because there would be no jetting off to warmer climes, all on account of a leaky roof that just had to be fixed.

Penelope, also known as Popster and Kick's identical twin, was annoyed as well. In February talk was all about holidays but by mid March it was all roofing materials and insulation. She had suggested a relaxing break nearer home but that had been shot down as well. There would be no holiday in the sun for them this year. However, that did not mean the sisters wouldn't be going far far away.

Popster fell out of bed and went next door to see Kick. "They're here!" she moaned, "they would have to come this Saturday."

"I bet they did it to annoy us. I can't understand why they picked that lot to do it."

"These are the scaffolders," pointed out Popster, "not the builders. We have that torture to come."

"What's the betting it'll be at the worst possible time as well."

"Without a roof any time is bad. Dad said they're putting a false plastic one over the whole house."

"I bet it'll leak. I'm putting some of my stuff in the garage."

“Good idea. You can’t be too careful!”

At breakfast the atmosphere soon became strained. “Why can’t you borrow more money?” asked Kick, “everyone else does.”

“Not everyone,” pointed out her mother, “the banks won’t touch some people.”

“Anyway,” said her father, “have you seen the size of our mortgage lately? We thought it best to spend some of our savings.”

“Didn’t Auntie Flo leave the whole family that money? For us all to enjoy?”

“She did,” said Popster. “She’d been all round the world and she wanted us to have the same chance. She told us that didn’t she Kick?”

“That’s right. All we want is a couple of weeks in Greece or....”

“She also cared for the environment,” interjected Mr Wagley, “we’ll save a lot on our heating bills.”

“Well, we can put more clothes on,” said Popster.

“I don’t want to go anywhere,” said Meldy, “there’s lots and lots to....”

“Who asked you?” interrupted Kick.

“Nobody but I’m just saying....”

“Well don’t!”

“That is not very nice is it Kathleen,” said Mrs Wagley. “Anyway, it’s got to be done now.”

“And we thought you were interested in the environment,” added Mr Wagley, “or is that just talk?”

“No Dad,” replied Popster, “but we’ve worked really hard at school and now our friends are off to exotic places and what are we going to tell them about our summer?”

“You could start a wildlife garden or what about getting a job?”

“You just don’t get it do you!” said Kick. “You send us to this school where everyone’s got loads of money and....”

“I think that’s enough Kathleen,” said her mother. “Your father is under a lot of pressure and once the roof started leaking we really had no choice.”

“Why don’t we start a wildlife garden?” asked Meldy, “we could all....”

“Oh shut up!” shouted Kick as she jumped up and stormed out. Popster, looking concerned, glanced at her parents then followed her sister upstairs.

“Will she be alright?” asked a worried Meldy.

“I think so dear,” said her mother. “She just hasn’t been herself lately.”

“Why?”

“It’s complicated dear. When you get a bit older you’ll understand.”

The three remaining family members ate in silence. Sounds of activity continued outside but there was no sound from upstairs. Twenty minutes passed before there was a thumping of feet on the stairs and Kick hurried past the door. Popster stuck her head in to say ‘we’re going for a walk’ prompting Meldy to run after them.

“Can I come too? Please?”

“No!” said Kick.

“Well alright,” said Popster, “just keep quiet and don’t get lost. We’ll never hear the last of it if you do!”

Meldy paused then went back to her mother. “Tell them not be late for lunch,” she said.

Meldy gave her a hug then ran after her sisters who were by now strolling up Woodhayes Lane. They took a track to the right then soon reached the largest trees on top of the hill behind their house. The twins chatted together and ignored Meldy who was by now skipping along somewhere in front. In the distance they heard a low rumble.

“Sounds like a storm,” said Popster. “We’d better turn back.” Then she heard a more insistent rumble. “Meldy! Come on, we’d better hurry!”

They quickened their pace but the rain caught up with them. First it was spots here and there, then there were bigger drops everywhere. Suddenly it

came down in buckets so they found a small shrinking dry spot under a sheltering tree and waited for it to pass.

“It’s getting closer!” whispered Popster as the rumbles became crashes and bangs. Now both Kick and Meldy were frightened as well. The three sisters were clinging to each other when the lightning struck.

Meldy was the first to come round. She opened her eyes and saw a statue. She also saw grass, trees and a low wooden fence. She could see houses and there was a strange sound, something she’d never heard before and there was a smell. She knew what that was, she’d smelt it at the riding stables. It was horse manure.

She turned over and there were her sisters, lying still. She got up and hurried over. “Popster! Kick! Wake up! Are you alright?”

Popster stirred. Her eyes opened and she blinked to clear them.

“What?” she asked, half question half groan.

“Popster!” repeated Meldy. “Where are we? What happened?”

Popster sat up and looked around. “What’s that noise? And that smell?” There was a sigh from Kick as she too opened her eyes.

“What on earth? Where are we?” she mumbled.

“It looks like London,” said Popster. “I’ve seen pictures of squares like this.”

Meldy turned her head from side to side. There were houses all around. Uniform dark grey brick houses with black slate roofs.

“What’s that?” she asked because of the sound of approaching horses’ hooves.

“Looks like a horse-drawn bus or something,” said Kick who had turned to look. They could see people sitting in the open on the top deck.

“Are we in some sort of theme park?” asked Popster.

They watched as it proceeded round the square. It stopped to let a woman off and she went into one of the houses.

“She’s wearing modern clothes anyway,” pointed out Popster putting on a brave face, “At least we haven’t travelled back in time.”

“Could we do that?” asked Meldy.

“Well, if we can get here from Wood Tofton, anything’s possible!” replied Kick.

The twins remained seated while Meldy walked up to the wooden fence. Birds were flying in and out of nest boxes on top of tall poles and she could see what looked like part of a main road through a gap between the houses. She watched a stream of horse-drawn vehicles moving past but there was no sign of any motor cars or lorries. Walking back to the statue, she tried to read an inscription which she couldn’t understand.

“Who’s Napoleon?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” asked Popster.

“That statue’s of someone called Napoleon.”

“It can’t be Meldy,” said Kick. “What’s a statue of Napoleon doing in London?”

“What if this isn’t London?” suggested Popster.

“It must be, mustn’t it?” asked Meldy who was pleased that Kick was talking to her again.

“Must it? I don’t know.” Any ideas, Kick?”

“Not at the moment, it still looks like London to me. Maybe the statue was put up by some society or other.”

“Who is he anyway?” asked Meldy.

“He was Emperor of France over two hundred years ago,” explained Kick.

“He was defeated at the battle of Waterloo. He ended up on an island somewhere,” added Popster.

“Then what’s his statue doing in London?” asked Meldy.

“What does the inscription say?” asked Kick.

“I don’t know. I couldn’t read it.”

Popster got up and walked over to have a look. She stood there for a minute or two then came back looking confused. “It’s in French,” she said.

“French?” asked Kick. “We’re not in France, are we?”

“What else did you see Meldy?” asked Popster.

“There’s a lot of horses over there, I couldn’t see any cars or lorries.”

“That’s what the noise must be,” said Kick. “It’s hundreds of horses’ hooves. Sounds like we’re in the middle of an old film or something.”

“That smell really gets up your nose, doesn’t it!” added Popster.

Kick stood up and looked around. High up on one of the poles, above all the nest boxes, was a closed circuit television camera. In a control room across the city an instruction was issued and a police wagon set out towards that same square.

To be continued