

## Chapter 10 Princess Augustine makes a decision

On Empire day morning, the Court Manteau's house was being made ready for Madame's musical evening and Sylvie the cook was busy in the kitchen. "I am making our royal visitor's favourite cakes," she told Meldy who was finding the aromas very enticing. "I am certain they will not eat them all so you can have some later."

"Thank you Sylvie!" said Meldy who really wanted to start eating them now.

"You can lick the spoon if you like." Meldy did like and now she thought of her mother who used to have time to bake. Lately, her job had become very demanding and all their cakes had come from a shop. They just weren't the same and of course there were no spoons to lick.

Sophie appeared so the two girls ambled over to the stables to look at the horses. "The royal party will bring their four horse carriage," said Marcel. "We will feed and water the horses while they are waiting. We will also help the royal coachmen to clean up ready for their return trip."

Back in the house, Madame was supervising preparations in the reception rooms. Kick was still practising on the grand piano in the 'Grande Salle' while the seating arrangements were being reorganised to suit the most important guests.

"Catherine, I did not think your playing could possibly improve but it has!" cried Madame as she busied herself with the camellias, the Princess's favourite flowers.

"Madame, it's your wonderful piano, it almost plays itself!" she replied.

"Catherine, as I keep saying, you are much too modest."

As the hour of the guest's arrival drew near, final preparations were being made. The Grande Salle was now ready and some tables and chairs had been set up in the garden. The weather had remained fine all day so it was expected that guests would wish to move outside during the interval.

Just before they were due to arrive, a message came for Monsieur Court Manteau. Negotiations with the strikers at the Bureau de Sanitaire had reached a delicate stage and there was a chance of a breakthrough. Unfortunately, as a result, he would have to miss the musical evening. Marcel took him in the carriage and it was left to Georges to look after the royal conveyance. This was to be his chance to show what he could do.

Meldy and Sophie watched the guests arriving from an upstairs window. Georges allowed some carriages into the yard while others remained on the street outside. "They all look so colourful!" cried Meldy.

The carriages, normally dark in colour, now looked very different. Red, white and blue were everywhere. As they watched, the smartly dressed occupants alighted and walked to the front door of the house. Once they had gone inside, Amelie came out with some refreshments for the waiting coachmen and women. Finally the royal carriage appeared and turned into the entrance passageway. It was also richly decorated and was drawn by four horses, just as Marcel had predicted.

Sophie and Meldy ran downstairs in order to greet the Princess and Prince. An ensemble played the national anthem and of course the guests bowed or curtsied. Princess Augustine noticed the two girls and smiled at their rather awkward efforts so after talking to some other guests, she came over to see them.

"Good evening your Royal Highness," said Sophie as she and Meldy repeated their clumsy curtsies, "this is my friend Esmeralda."

"Good evening Esmeralda, I am pleased to meet you."

"Good evening, your Royal Highness," replied Meldy. "Please your Royal Highness, don't you have a big carriage with six horses? Why didn't you bring that?"

"Esmeralda, we chose a smaller one this time as the larger carriage can cause problems in the yard. Turning round can be difficult."

"I did so want to see it. I've never ever seen one that big."

"One day I will bring it so you can both have a ride."

"Please, will you, we'd really like that!"

"Esmeralda, how do you like living here?"

"I really like it. Everyone is so kind and I really like my new friend Sophie. It is so much better than the Odious Bourgs and I love all the horses but I do miss my parents."

"Of course. Captain Duplessis told me about the Bourg family but I am pleased you are happy here. She has informed me that you were all

kidnapped and the police are searching for the criminals. You see, when I heard about you I made some enquiries.”

“Thank you your highness.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“That is very kind of you your highness,” replied Meldy. She was then nudged by Sophie and she immediately guessed what it was for.

“Your highness, we were naughty and we got a boy expelled from his choir.”

“Why, what did you do?”

Meldy told her the story and the Princess laughed.

“That is just the sort of thing I did when I was your age. Of course, the boy was right. The world would be a better place if more people were honest.”

“Your highness,” said Meldy, “he’s very good and he’s singing tonight.”

“I will look forward to hearing him. Our Master of Music is always looking for choristers of ability to sing in our chapel choir.”

“Are there girls in your choir too, your Highness?” asked Meldy.

“Yes, Esmeralda, there are girls too. I have insisted on it!”

Their attention was diverted by Madame, who wished to announce Antoinette’s first song. Kick sat at the grand piano, checked her music then signalled to Antoinette. The song was very well received and the applause from the audience was such that Antoinette and Kick bowed repeatedly. Kick returned to the keyboard and then Popster stood beside Antoinette. They sang the second song together as planned and once again there was enthusiastic applause.

The surprise of the evening was Raoul. His mother had brought him but he was still nervous. Antoinette and the twins had made sure he was very well rehearsed so he delivered a faultless performance. The audience applauded so much he performed an encore.

In the interval, some of the guests strolled out into the garden through the large French windows. Kick, who needed a breath of air, was talking to Alain. “I’ve never been so nervous in my life,” she laughed. “I looked at the music and the notes started dancing around in front of my eyes!”

“Well they must have settled down again,” he replied, “ because your playing was very impressive.”

“Miss Catherine,” said Sylvie who was nearby with a tray of treats, “Amelie fetched me so I listened outside the door. Tears came to my eyes. The songs are so familiar and your playing was wonderful. It was extraordinary, I have never heard Miss Antoinette sing so beautifully and Madame looked so proud.”

Amelie, who had been listening with her, went over to Madame and handed her something. Anyone who had been watching would have seen it was a letter of importance.

Antoinette rushed to her mother’s side and it soon became clear they were distressed. Princess Augustine noticed something was wrong and went over to talk to them. She was shocked to hear that Antoine was in hospital in Liverpool and his condition was serious. It was all explained in the letter that had arrived from France. Antoinette left the room with Madame while Sophie stayed behind with Meldy. She was soon crying.

“It is Antoine, he is in hospital and we cannot go and see him!” she sobbed.

“It’s not fair! replied Meldy who was comforting her friend. Princess Augustine came over so Meldy turned to her. “It’s not fair your highness. Antoine can’t come here and his family aren’t allowed to go there!”

The Princess paused. “Esmeralda, I agree with you. It does not sound fair to me.”

In the garden, Alain was talking to Prince Louis. “They say, your Royal Highness, that it is an ill wind that blows no one any good. The labour dispute in the Bureau de Sanitaire has resulted in more flies and, of course, more maggots. Both the flycatchers and myself are enjoying this bounty.”

The Prince laughed. “So in future the buffet will contain maggots served in a variety of delicious ways?”

“Delicious for us, yes, but not for the maggots,” replied Alain as he looked around in an attempt to understand what was happening.

“But, Alain, they gave their lives in a good cause. Their relatives might, one day, get their revenge. Anyway, I will soon be in the South of France visiting my mother.”

"I wish you a safe journey your highness."

"Ah," said the Prince, "here is my sister and I think the performance is about to restart."

Once again, Kick sat at the piano while the vocals were provided by Antoinette and Popster. Raoul also sang a solo before the Ensemble played the final piece. When the applause had died down, Princess Augustine rose to her feet.

After praising the performers she turned to Madame. "Madame Court Manteau," she said, "you should be allowed to visit your son while he is in hospital. This raises a question, why do our laws not allow free travel to our neighbouring country? If Antoine had returned to play the piano for Antoinette on this Empire Day or any other day, his mother, father and sisters would have been sent to prison unless they had informed the police as soon as he appeared. Is this a just law? Looking around, I know there are other guests who are missing loved ones who have also gone to England. I think it is wrong to criminalise so many of our young people. What is their alleged crime? Only a legitimate wish to visit England and return home without fear of retribution. This law must be changed, and changed soon."

The room was quiet and all the guests were giving her their full attention. When she had finished, everyone applauded, including her brother Prince Louis.

"This I pledge to you," she continued, "I will gather more evidence and then I will, with your support, address the Assembly of Advisors. They must in turn advise the Emperor of that support."

The enthusiastic applause which followed marked the close of Madame's musical evening. Prince Louis personally thanked Georges for helping his coachmen prepare the royal carriage. Marcel was also full of praise when he returned with Monsieur. Georges had certainly risen to the challenge but he now had to perform an unpleasant task.

"Monsieur," he began, his voice shaking, "Madame wishes to see you urgently."

One of the guests, a member of that Assembly, climbed into his carriage and gave his driver the signal to depart. He had listened to the Princess's speech and was not happy. "She will cause trouble," he thought, "because her father will listen to her. She is typical of the youth of today, they want to interfere in things they do not understand."

He pulled out his address book and started to plan his next move.

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In their attic room the three sisters talked late into the night.

“Have you ever wondered,” mused Kick, “whether being sent here was in some way meant to make us pay for being rude to our parents?”

“You mean about the holiday we insisted we should have had?”

“Exactly. We got a trip after all, didn’t we, only not the one we’d wanted.”

“I wasn’t rude,” said Meldy.

“No you weren’t,” replied Kick.

“Anyway,” said Popster, “I’m glad we’re all together,”

“Meldy thought for a bit then said, “I like it here but now I want to go home. How are we going to get back?”

“Meldy, we only wish we knew!”

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On the following evening, Alain came to visit. Meldy went upstairs early while Antoinette and the twins stayed up late. Alain told them about a discussion he had had with an expert on parallel worlds.

“It has been thought for many years that other worlds exist but at present we have no way of visiting them. So many events result in, or directly lead to, other events. Take the battle of Waterloo. In your world the Prussian army arrived to break a stalemate which led to the Emperor Napoleon’s defeat. In our world they were delayed crossing the river Rhine so when they finally arrived they were too late to affect the outcome. Emperor Napoleon’s victory was inevitable.”

“Does that mean,” asked Kick, “there could be more parallel worlds where he never became Emperor?”

“It is possible, according to the theory.”

“Where exactly are these worlds?” asked Antoinette.

“That is a good question,” replied Alain, “are they there but we are unable to see them? But, some of these worlds must have already communicated with us. The evidence is right here, I am of course referring to Catherine and Patrice!”

“Don’t forget Esmeralda,” laughed Kick.

Eventually the twins said goodnight and wandered back upstairs. They were surprised to see Amelie sitting with Meldy.

“Esmeralda cried out in her sleep so I came to be with her,” she said.

“That’s very kind of you Amelie. What was it Meldy?”

“We were in a square and we sat beside a fountain. The three of us met this nice woman, with short black hair. She had a friendly smile and I called to her but she wasn’t there anymore.”

“Just a moment,” said Amelie. She rushed out into the corridor and returned with a photograph.

“Who’s that?” asked Kick.

Meldy looked at the picture. “That’s her! I know it is!” she cried.

“This,” said Amelie, “is my friend Stephanie.” She looked to the twins. Her look, a questioning, meaningful look, told them what she wanted to know. Could Meldy be trusted? Did she have a history of wildly imagining things?

“If Meldy is convinced, then that’s who was in her dream,” stated Popster.

“She is trying to contact me, I am certain!” cried Amelie. “What is she trying to tell me? Esmeralda, when you said she was not there, what do you think happened?”

Meldy looked thoughtful, “well, she sat and talked to us. She was pleased to see us and she liked me I could tell. Then she started to go fuzzy. She didn’t look worried, or scared, she just kept talking and smiling then she wasn’t there.”

“As if she knew where she was going?” asked Popster.

“Well, she smiled and she didn’t look worried. I really liked her and I hope she comes back soon!”

Amelie hugged Meldy then stood up to leave. The twins thanked her again for her help.

“I have a good feeling about Stephanie,” said Popster, “I think she’s alright.”

Kick agreed. “I’m sure she’ll be back soon.”

Amelie smiled through her tears and nodded. “Stephanie is exactly as Esmeralda described her. She always thinks of others. She is the best friend you could hope for and she could not do enough for me. Like a sister. But you know what that is like.”

The twins looked at each other, “yes we know all about that don’t we.”

To be continued