

Chapter 12 Where are the Princess and Antoinette?

A few days later, Madame had a surprise for the sisters. They were to go on a short holiday to Dover, or Douvres as it was called in the Department de Londres. Amelie was to go with them as a reward for all her hard work while Stephanie was away but Antoinette was to follow one day later due to a recital she was to give at the palace.

A few hours after their train had left for Douvres, Marcel waited with the carriage outside the Bureau de Sanitaire. He was wondering what he was going to say to Monsieur Court Manteau. He had driven to the palace to collect Monsieur's daughter Antoinette but he had been denied entry.

When Monsieur appeared, something in his coachman's expression told him all was not well. There were other people nearby and his manner was signalling caution. Monsieur climbed into the carriage and Marcel instructed the four horses to walk out of the gate. Once on the embankment by the River Couronne he slowed the carriage, looked round to see if anyone was close by, then came to a stop.

He climbed down and peered underneath the carriage. Monsieur Court Manteau climbed out to see what the problem was.

"There is a noise coming from here Monsieur," he said as he pointed to the axle. Then, in a whisper, "Monsieur, something has happened, something very worrying! I went to the palace gate but some people were blocking the entrance and said Mademoiselle Antoinette was not there. They were very hostile so I left because I did not want to get into trouble." Marcel then prodded the axle because two people were walking past.

"Marcel, you did the right thing. If something bad has happened, it is best not to attract the wrong sort of attention." He then stood up and said in a clearly audible voice, "yes Marcel. You are correct. Do you think we will make it home?"

"I think so Monsieur but I will attend to it this evening."

Once at home inside his central courtyard, Monsieur turned to his loyal coachman. "Marcel, I have heard rumours and I also know some important people do not want change so I think they must have staged a coup."

"It certainly appears that way Monsieur. The men at the palace gate looked like an angry mob to me."

"I think we should all meet in the house in thirty minutes. I will go and change first."

Once inside, he switched on the radio only to hear stirring martial music. Then there was silence but after a brief interlude there was an announcement.

"Citizens of the Departement de Londres," it began, "a crisis in our country has been averted. You, the people, told us that you do not want change. You want stability, order and strong leadership not chaos, disorder and corruption."

It continued, "In accordance with your will, your representatives have entered the palace only to find the Royal family have fled taking their friends with them. They are now living a life of luxury in France while your representatives will have to sort out the mess they left behind. Luckily they could not take all their plunder with them so this has now been seized and will form the core of a new museum exhibit. Entry will be free to all loyal law abiding citizens."

It concluded, "the Transitional Council is now meeting to decide on our future direction. Citizens, your voice has been heard and we have decided to appoint a new head of state. This person will be of noble birth but must be someone who will abide by the will of you, the people. Long live the Citizens of the Departement de Londres!"

At the start of the staff meeting, Monsieur thanked them all for their loyalty to the family then spoke about the situation as he understood it. He told them about the broadcast but they couldn't believe it because they had all seen the Princess and her brother Prince Louis when they had recently come to Madame's Empire Day musical evening.

"Monsieur," said Stephanie, "I do not believe Mademoiselle Antoinette would leave without saying anything."

"I think you are right Stephanie," replied Monsieur. "But, we must remember to be very careful. We do not know what they, that is those in control, plan to do. Do not say anything critical as speaking out could be dangerous. So, I think we have to accept their story for the moment. We must not endanger Antoinette or of course our royal family."

Marcel spoke next. "Monsieur Court Manteau is right. I was at the palace gate today and the people on guard were very hostile so I left as quickly as I could."

“Marcel acted wisely,” said Monsieur, “we must remain calm and I am sure once the new regime has established itself my daughter will be allowed to come home.”

“Monsieur,” asked Sylvie the cook, “is there anything we can do?”

“Thank you Sylvie. We must carry on as before. Please do not discuss this with anyone. Listen to what others have to say but be non committal in return. If you hear anything new, let me know. Thank you for your loyalty, attention and concern.”

Later, he tried to telephone his wife. No connection. ‘Princess Augustine had already made arrangements to visit King Edward in England,’ he thought. ‘Of course, that will not happen and it will be taken as an insult by the English. That is exactly what they want. The question is, why?’

He walked to his study, sat down and reflected. ‘Antoinette must have had no warning of what was about to occur. She probably has to be kept with the Princess because she knows what really happened. I think they are still in the Departement.’

He shuffled through some papers but still could not concentrate. ‘This talk of someone of noble birth,’ he thought, ‘and someone who will abide by the will of the people, what do they actually mean? Do they want someone who will do what they say? If so, so much for the will of the people, it is their will they are thinking of!’

He tried the telephone again but it remained dead. ‘A hostage,’ he thought, ‘that is what our daughter is, a hostage!’

While he was thinking, his nephew Alain Court Manteau arrived. “Uncle Henri,” he said as he was ushered into the study by Stephanie, “have you heard the news?”

“Yes Alain, I have.”

Alain enquired about his cousin. “They say Antoinette is in France ,” said Monsieur, “but I think she is probably being held somewhere in Londres. I have no idea where.”

Alain’s face displayed his concern. “Ah. I did wonder what they meant by ‘someone who will abide by the will of the people.’ They could well be using her as a bargaining tool.”

“Exactly. I was thinking the same thing. However, they have not made contact yet. What have you heard?”

“Only their broadcast, but I think they will soon make their move. Stability will be important to them and our family is the oldest in the Departement so be prepared for a visit.”

“True, and I am the family’s oldest surviving male representative. If you are correct, they will approach me first, then your father.”

At that moment, there was a loud knock at the front door. Alain turned to his uncle, “They are here. You have a few seconds Uncle Henri, what will you say?”

“To accept means we can buy some time,” replied Monsieur. “To decline might mean imprisonment.”

Stephanie had ushered four members of the Transitional Council into the Grande Salle so Monsieur and Alain joined them. One of the visitors started to speak. “Monsieur Court Manteau. You have heard our broadcast earlier this evening?”

“Yes, I have.”

“Then you will have heard that we are appointing a new head of state. This person will not have as much authority as the Emperor but times, after all, have changed.”

He continued, “it cannot be a surprise that yours was the first name to emerge. As the senior member of a family descended from King Henry the Second, Duke of Normandy, also a descendent of Geoffrey the Fifth, Count of Anjou, you have both French and English ancestry.”

Another visitor added, “Your residence will remain here for the foreseeable future and protection will be provided. The palace will become the museum of the people.”

A third visitor concluded, “we suggest you consider your options and inform us of your decision by tomorrow evening.”

“Thank you for the honour,” replied Monsieur. “I was wondering, how can I contact my daughter?”

The four visitors exchanged glances before replying. "She has gone to the South of France with the exiled royal family. We do not have an address but no doubt she will contact you soon."

After the representatives had left, Alain had a question. "Did you notice the way they acted when you asked about Antoinette?"

"Yes Alain," replied Monsieur, "their expressions gave so much away. They were 'what are we going to tell him' looks so they were definitely lying. Now I am convinced she is still in the palace. This talk of a museum is a stalling tactic. They do not want anyone else in there while they search through the royal family's possessions."

"I think they will sell a lot," said Alain. "The more portable pieces of jewellery have probably gone already and I wonder who will get the proceeds?"

"After ten generations of Emperors," replied Monsieur, "there must have been many valuable items in there."

Stephanie was talking to Sylvie in the kitchen. "I am worried about Mademoiselle Antoinette," she said, "and I am convinced she is being held prisoner here, so she never went to France."

"Look at this," said Sylvie. She produced the latest newspaper which showed Princess Augustine boarding a train. "so you think she is not really leaving?"

"Well," replied Stephanie, "she has an assistant but where are Antoinette and the Emperor? Surely they would want them in the picture to make it look more convincing?"

"You are right," said Sylvie. "This could be an old photograph from the archive."

"Yes," replied Stephanie, "If they had a more recent picture they would have used that."

"So you think they are lying?"

"It looks like it," replied Stephanie. "If Mademoiselle Antoinette is still here, we have to find out where she is."

Stephanie was later asked by Monsieur to see him in his study. "Please sit down Stephanie. I have been thinking. Are you prepared to carry a message to Madame in Douvres?"

"Of course, Monsieur. I want to help if I can."

"Thank you. You are the obvious choice to go. I think it best if you stay there for the rest of the week. You might be questioned. If you are, tell them you are replacing Amelie who should then come back the following day."

"Monsieur, do you think the police will be questioning travellers?"

"I do not know. But, if they are, you must have a story ready so be sure to take some luggage with you."

Marcel drove Stephanie to the station and she caught the train to Douvres. Fifteen minutes into the journey two police officers appeared and asked for identification.

"Stephanie Saintclaire," said one. The other checked a list.

"So. You are employed by the Court Manteau family. What is the purpose of your trip?"

"I am going to attend Madame Court Manteau. It was arranged that I would relieve her maid who will come back tomorrow."

"That is Amelie Lanoe?" asked the officer as he looked down his list.

"Yes officer."

"We will look out for her. Is this your bag?"

"Yes."

"Open it."

The bag was opened and the female officer rifled through it.

"Nothing suspicious," she said, "it does look like she is going for a few days."

The police officers moved on to check other passengers leaving Stephanie alone with her thoughts.

‘What are they looking for?’ she mused, ‘and what did they expect to find? Is this what we have to expect from the new regime? Amelie must hear the full story in case they question her.’

On arrival, Stephanie hired a gig to take her to the hotel. Once there she was shown onto the terrace where the Court Manteau party were having lunch. They were overjoyed to see her but they knew they could not discuss the political situation in such a public place. One could not possibly know who was listening.

Later, in Madame’s room, Stephanie told them the news. Everyone listened intently then Madame had a question.

“Stephanie, does Monsieur think that Antoinette has really left?”

“No Madame. We all think she is being held somewhere in the Departement.”

“Then we must find her,” said Kick.

“Yes, but how?” asked Madame. “Catherine, we must be careful. They will be watching us all.”

“But surely they can’t see everything Madame?” asked Popster. “We could go to the palace when they reopen the gardens. We might see something.”

“Why don’t you sing one of the songs,” said Kick. “She might hear and give us a signal.”

“But you must be careful,” cautioned Madame.

“Can we come too?” asked Meldy.

“That is a good idea Esmeralda,” said Stephanie. “Taking little children to see the gardens, what could be more natural?”

“We are not little children,” replied Sophie.

“Of course, Miss Sophie,” said Amelie, “but you can pretend that you are. That could help divert their attention.”

That afternoon they all walked along the cliffs. They looked out over the channel to the distant French coast but said nothing about the political situation. Amelie could not help being disappointed that her break was to be cut short but she fully understood the logic behind the decision. This was

in evidence the following morning when she realised the police were looking out for her on the train.

“Did you have a nice break?” asked one as the policewoman checked her bag.

“Yes thank you officer.”

“You will have more work to do now that Monsieur Court Manteau is to be made head of state, I expect the English twins will help?”

“Of course they will,” replied Amelie.

“So we can expect to see the rest of the party on this train at the end of the week?” asked the policewoman as she handed back Amelie’s bag.

“Yes officer. At the end of the week.”

To be continued