

Chapter 14. Captain Duplessis pays a visit

Next morning, after the sisters had finished their breakfast, Sophie and Meldy went out into the garden. Sophie suggested they should climb on the wall and watch the traffic.

They picked the most convenient tree and, using suitable branches, climbed up so they could peer over the top. One of the guards was directly below them.

“What’s he doing?” whispered Meldy.

“Is he reading a book?” replied Sophie. “He should be walking up and down guarding us properly!”

A few vehicles passed by, their drivers loosely holding the reins as if the horses knew their route. One carriage stopped at the entrance to the house and the occupants were checked by the second guard.

“Who’s that?” whispered Meldy.

“Someone has come to see Father. He has to sign a lot of papers now.”

“What sort of papers?”

“I do not know. I think they are to do with the new government.”

The carriage had disappeared into the courtyard behind the house. As they watched, another carriage appeared and stopped at the entrance. A woman climbed out. She had a blue-grey uniform and a shiny black hat and matching belt.

The guard’s attitude changed in an instant. A sloppy, relaxed person was replaced by an erect, attentive individual. The guard below them, who had been leaning against the wall reading, hid his book and sprinted over to join his colleague.

Meldy peered through the branches. “It’s Captain Duplessis!”

Captain Duplessis left the guards and knocked on the front door. She was ushered into the house and her carriage went through the entrance into the courtyard at the rear. Ten minutes passed then Amelie came into the garden to find them.

“Mademoiselle Esmeralda? Where are you?”

“We can hide up here, she cannot see us,” whispered Sophie

“I have to go,” sighed Meldy. “My sisters might be in trouble.”

They climbed down the tree and followed Amelie into the house. Captain Duplessis was waiting in the morning room but first she wanted to see Kick on her own.

“So Catherine, tell me why you are interested in the palace.”

“I always thought,” she replied, “that it was an interesting building. Do you know how old it is Captain?”

“No, I do not.”

“It dates back to the eleventh century and used to be an abbey. Isn’t that amazing?”

“If you say so. You were overheard using the code ‘P.A.’ . We all know what that stands for.”

“Public Address?” replied Kick, “I understand the building is to be turned into a museum. The Public Address system could use the medieval undercroft as a route for the cables. It would be the perfect solution to communicate between the rooms above.”

“Catherine,” replied a sceptical Captain, “‘P. A.’ stands for Princess Augustine.”

“But she’s in the South of France.”

“Very well. I advise you to be careful, very careful. I am sure you have heard the news so I do not need to tell you why that is important.”

“Maybe you’re right,” replied Kick. “I might wish to return to the library at some point in the future. Which buildings can I research without attracting too much attention?”

“Try Saint Peter’s Cathedral. That has an interesting history.” Kick could not tell the Captain that she already knew a lot about it. She had seen pictures and it was, in her world, called Saint Paul’s Cathedral.

The Captain concluded, “well, I think we can leave it there for the moment. Once again Catherine, be careful. You are, like your sister, highly intelligent

and soon I hope to see you both studying at our university. However, we do have other buildings that are interesting. Please will you send in Patrice and Esmeralda.”

Popster and Meldy were soon sitting in front of the Captain. “So,” she said, “it is like old times, is it not?”

“Yes, Madame Captain,” replied Meldy as she hunched herself down in her seat. Popster said nothing.

“I understand you all went to Douvres.”

Meldy didn’t say anything. Were they in trouble for going on holiday?

“Is this true, Esmeralda?”

Meldy looked at her sister who sat with an expressionless face.

“I suppose so,” she eventually replied.

“Good. It is best to tell the truth because you were observed returning to Londres anyway so you cannot deny it. What did you do while you were there?”

“We went for a walk,” replied Meldy, “along the cliffs. And we went to the castle.”

“Did you go to the docks?”

“No, I don’t like docks.”

“Very well then. Now, two of you passed through a police checkpoint yesterday. Catherine was not with you. Why not?”

Meldy looked at her sister. What would she say?

“She went off with Amelie,” said Popster.

“Why did you not go with them?”

“Well,” replied Popster, “it was such a nice day we thought we would walk around the palace gardens. Have you been there, Captain? The flowers are really beautiful at this time of year.”

“Yes, I am sure they are Patrice. Is that why you chose to break into song? To honour the beauty of the flowers?”

“But of course Captain, but they didn’t want me too. Perhaps they don’t like music.”

“I think,” interjected the Captain, “it was because they thought it might be a signal of some sort.”

“To whom would I be signalling?” asked Popster with a good effort at looking innocent.

“You know very well,” replied the Captain.

“The only person I can think of is Antoinette Court Manteau. But it can’t be her because she’s in France.”

“Let us look at the facts,” continued the Captain. “The song you sang was in French. While I was waiting I looked at the music on top of the piano. What did I find? The music and words for that same song. It is highly likely that you learnt the song here with Antoinette Court Manteau, who, I hear, has an excellent singing voice. If she heard it, she would probably try to send you a signal. What I want to know is, did you see or hear anything remotely like a signal?”

The two sisters sat in silence.

“I am waiting for an answer!”

Meldy was first to break this silence. “It’s not fair! Monsieur and Madame have a daughter, and a son, but they can’t see them. Antoine is in hospital, he’s sick and they’re not allowed to go. Antoinette is, they don’t know where, but I’m sure she wants to come home!”

“Esmeralda,” replied the Captain, “both Antoine and Antoinette Court Manteau chose to leave the country. It was their choice.”

“But Antoinette didn’t leave a message. People always leave messages when they go away, don’t they?”

“Perhaps she did but it was not delivered.”

“What does paras ... parasitic, yes, that’s it. What does ‘parasitic’ mean?”

“Well, it relates to something, or someone, who lives off other people’s efforts. Like a tapeworm. Why do you ask?”

“The boat on the river. Someone was saying that the children of the Emperor were ‘parasitic’.”

“Well,” replied the Captain, “that depends how you define ‘parasitic’, I suppose.”

“Princess Augustine is not a tapeworm! She’s the Emperor’s daughter and I liked her. She talked to us and she understood. She was interested in what we said, that’s not what a parasitic does, is it?”

“You mean that is not what a parasite does.”

“A parasitic, I mean a parasite takes and doesn’t give. She gave, didn’t she?”

“What did she give you, Esmeralda?”

“She gave me what I asked for. She helped my friend Raoul to sing in her choir and now he can’t sing there anymore.”

“Is he upset about that?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen him lately. He was really happy when he was picked but if the Princess isn’t here there won’t be a choir, will there?”

“The chapel has been shut, that is true.”

“But that’s not fair either. Lots of girls and boys sang there but now they can’t.”

Popster was watching the proceedings with interest. She was impressed by the way Meldy kept doggedly on but didn’t betray them, after all she was only asking reasonable questions.

“Well,” said the Captain, “I must be going. I think you are right, Esmeralda. The chapel should be re-opened. As for looking for the people we have discussed, my advice to you is: be very careful.”

Shortly after the Captain’s visit, Francois, the new coachman, arrived. He had had a lifetime’s experience and could drive teams of up to six horses.

Meldy and Sophie went into the yard to have a look. He seemed quite old and was laughing about something with Marcel when he saw them peering out from behind a recently delivered stack of straw.

“It looks like we have some mice!” he said.

Meldy and Sophie dived behind the stack. Soon, they could not resist another peep.

“I do not know how they got in,” joked Marcel. “Perhaps we should find our cat?”

“We are not mice!” cried Sophie from behind the stack.

“Talking mice! What do you feed them on?” laughed Francois.

“Mademoiselle Sophie, come out and meet Francois,” suggested Marcel.

Sophie and Meldy sheepishly appeared but still kept their distance.

“I am Sophie and this is my best friend, Esmeralda.”

“You are lucky to still have your best friend, Mademoiselle Sophie,” said Francois. “My granddaughter’s best friend recently moved away.”

“Where did she go?” asked Sophie.

“She went to France and will not be coming back.”

Later that same week Francois took the carriage to collect some supplies for the house. On his way back he collected his granddaughter and brought her back to the yard. He would take her home after he’d finished work.

She sat in a corner looking sad so Meldy and Sophie went over. “Do you want to climb on the wall with us?” asked Sophie.

“Grandpapa told me to wait here,” she shyly replied.

“He won’t mind,” said Meldy. “He told us about your best friend. What’s your name?”

“Eloise,” she answered.

"I am Esmeralda and this is Sophie. Come on, we can explore the garden can't we Sophie."

Eloise was bored sitting there so she chose to go with them. "I do like it here," she said. "It is just like a palace garden."

"No, it is not," said Sophie. "Palace gardens are much bigger and they are beside rivers."

"Not all palaces are beside rivers," replied Eloise. "I have a picture book with lots of palaces. Some are on top of hills."

"I bet you have not been inside a palace," said Sophie. "I have."

"I have not but grandpapa has."

"Did he meet the Emperor?" asked Meldy.

"No, he said the Emperor had gone to France but he went inside to meet some men."

They heard Francois calling her name so they took her back to the stables.

At the end of the day the twins were with Meldy in their attic room. "Why would a coachman go to the palace?" she asked.

"Well Meldy," replied Popster, "why do you think?"

"Oh, could it be to take people there?"

"Makes sense to me."

Meldy thought for a bit while the twins talked to each other.

"But she said"

"Who said?" interjected Kick.

"Eloise."

"Who's Eloise?"

“Francois’ granddaughter. He’s the new coachman.”

“What did she say?” asked a confused Kick.

“She definitely said her grandfather had been into the Palace to meet some men after the Emperor had gone to France.”

Just then Amelie appeared so they invited her in. Francois and his granddaughter were forgotten.

When the sisters went to sleep that night, they probably thought the following day would be a continuation of their routine. They could not have guessed that this routine was about to be disrupted. The Departement de Londres would soon be following a very different course.

To be continued