

## Chapter 19. The Mob Retreats

Meldy and Sophie were upstairs watching as an ugly mob approached the house. This mob had positioned itself around ten metres away from the police line and were taunting them.

“Hand over the fake Princess!” they chanted.

“Disperse!” called out Captain Duplessis. “There is no fake Princess, only the real one who never left the Departement. In the absence of the Emperor, she is the legal head of state in our country. You have been misled by the Transitional Council.”

Meldy saw some movement out of the corner of her eye. Marcel the coachman and Georges the stable boy were standing in front of the entrance, behind the police line. They were holding some rather large pitch forks.

‘I hope they don’t have to use them!’ thought Meldy. ‘Why isn’t Francois with them?’

Although both were scared they watched, fascinated. Down below nobody moved. The mob, still at a distance, stood their ground and carried on chanting. Far away, something else was moving.

“There is someone coming!” cried Sophie.

They soon realised a lot more people were approaching. They saw what looked like a sea of heads bobbing along behind a line of people coming towards the house. They were carrying placards on poles which were still too far away to be read. They came nearer and nearer but the mob taunting the police line had not yet realised they had company.

Now, Meldy and Sophie could read some of the writing. “They are on our side!” cried Meldy.

The ‘police taunters’ finally realised something else was happening so they turned to look. Their taunting ceased. They were now like the filling in a sandwich, what would they do? They stood there, uncertain, heavily outnumbered.

The two opposing groups stood apart as if sizing each other up. Then there was some shuffling as the new arrivals passed their poles forward so that everyone on the front rank was holding one aloft. Suddenly, as if by command, these poles were lowered so they were facing forward like a row

of lances. There was a shout and the student phalanx charged at the mob. Most scattered and some paused, uncertain what to do next. Soon they realised the game was up so they scattered as well.

Down below, Meldy could still see the back of Captain Duplessis, standing with her colleagues. Her shoulders, initially tensed up and ready, relaxed. The crisis was over for now.

The new arrivals cheered and the sound echoed round the streets bringing out some curious onlookers. Alain emerged from the crowd and came forward to shake Captain Duplessis by the hand. Marcel and Georges put down their weapons and went over to speak to Alain and the Captain.

Antoinette and the twins burst into Sophie's room. "Did you see? Wasn't it amazing?" cried Kick.

Monsieur Court Manteau and Princess Augustine appeared. "I must go out and speak to them," she said.

"It would be better from here," suggested Antoinette. "More people will see you and your voice will carry better."

The window was flung open. The noise attracted attention and more and yet more people looked up. The acting head of state, Monsieur Court Manteau, spoke to the crowd and introduced the Princess as the legitimate head. In the absence of her father, and as his eldest child, she legally held this position. When Monsieur stepped back, she positioned herself so her voice would project as far as possible.

"It is definitely the Princess! She is here!" some people cried.

"Yes," she replied. "I am here. I did not leave. I was held prisoner on the orders of the Transitional Council and my father, the Emperor, is still in custody."

She continued, "am I an impostor? am I a fake princess? This is what you have been told and it is a lie. They have talked about the will of you, the people. What do they mean by this? They do not know what your will is because they have never asked. Well, I am asking you now. Do you want open borders?"

"Yes!" chanted the crowd.

"Do you want better relations with England?"

“Yes!”

“Have we your support when we select a new Assembly of Advisors so that a programme of reform can be initiated?”

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” Their enthusiasm was evident.

“We thank you all for what you have done. This day shall be known as ‘Restoration Day’ and will be a national holiday. We thank you all from the bottom of our hearts.”

Antoinette, Sophie and the Wagley sisters went outside to mix with the crowd. Stephanie had already made some friends in the university’s Education Department and the twins went up to speak to her.

“You know Stephanie?” asked one woman. “If it had not been for her, Princess Augustine could have been in danger!”

“She is very personable,” said another. “She says she has not been to university but I find that difficult to believe.”

Stephanie stood beside them looking suitably modest.

“Where are you two from?” asked the first woman.

“England,” replied Kick.

“So you can go back when the borders re open,” she said.

“Yes, we probably can,” replied Kick. She was wondering what would happen out in the Physics department. When would Albert Camion be dismissed so that Professor Lecomte could continue with his experiments unobserved? Things would have to be done under his sole supervision or they would not be able to return safely to ‘their’ England, their ‘parallel world’ England.

“You look a bit wistful,” observed the woman, “do you miss home a lot?”

“Well yes, er, you know what it’s like when you’re a long way away,” mused Popster.

“It is not that far, is it?” she asked.

Her mouth replied, “no I suppose not,” but her mind said, ‘if only you knew.’

Alain came to join them. “We are organising a rota to guard the house. The police will keep ten officers here for the next few days but we need to be ready in case of more trouble. They know where she is now so I cannot believe they will just give up.”

Captain Duplessis went into the house to speak to Princess Augustine. “Thank you Captain for your prompt and decisive action. Without your officers the situation could have become dangerous.”

“Your highness, our duty was clear. We were obeying the law.”

“Of course, but I suspect the other side thought the same thing. Their ‘fake Princess’ ploy could have caused problems because most of their supporters have never seen me. Based on that, how could they really know who I am?”

“Your Highness, now we have to find the Emperor. Do you think he is still in the Palace, or is he being held somewhere else?”

“I suspect he is still there, most probably in one of three rooms. I could draw you a map if you think it might help.”

“I wonder,” mused the Captain, “if they know who really got you out? I heard Raoul could have been involved because his torch was found.”

“Yes, he was with Sophie, Esmeralda and Paul. They came in via the royal chapel and a secret passage.”

“You mean?”

“Yes, I owe my freedom to four curious, adventurous but very brave children!”

“What about the twins?”

“They played an important role but it was the children who first rescued me.”

The Captain then asked to see Meldy and Sophie. “Esmeralda, when you first appeared how could I have guessed how important your contribution would be! Your name, together with Sophie’s and the two boys, Raoul and Paul, will be written in our history books. Of course, that depends on which side is triumphant.”

‘Me? In a history book?’ thought Meldy. ‘I like the sound of that!’ What would her friends say? Oh, of course. They’d probably laugh because they would not believe it.

“Sophie and Esmeralda,” said Captain Duplessis, “we will need the secret passage to gain entry to the palace. Can you tell me how you found your way to the Princess’s room?”

“We can show you if you like,” said Sophie.

“Bring torches,” said Meldy, “It’s really dark and spooky down there!”

“Yes, thank you. It might be dangerous to take that same route so I think it will be best if you stay behind.”

“Why?”

“They might know about the passage and be waiting for us.”

“Please be careful,” said Meldy, “you might get hurt.”

The Captain felt a lump rising in her throat. ‘It was a lucky day for us,’ she thought, ‘when these sisters turned up on our doorstep.’

On the following day she returned with two of her Lieutenants. The Wagley sisters, together with Sophie, were asked to be present. The Captain introduced the young officers then stressed the importance of accuracy.

“We need to know as much as possible,” she said, “about the underground passage so we do not have any nasty surprises.”

Together the four adventurers described the route.

“The passage to the undercroft,” asked the first Lieutenant, “how high and how wide is it? Can two people pass through it side by side and how much headroom is there? Are there any corners for people to hide round?”

Once they had the information they sought, they turned to the undercroft itself.

“So the entry door opened noiselessly, are you sure about that?” asked the second Lieutenant.

“The door in the ossuary creaked but that one didn’t,” said Meldy.

“Princess Augustine has the key,” added Sophie.

“Which key?” asked the Captain.

“The key to the first door. The one that creaks,” replied Meldy.

“We will borrow that in case we need it. Thank you. There was no door on the stairway leading up to the Palace rooms?”

“No,” said Sophie, “but there is a corner on the stairway.”

“The door was on the left at the top,” added Meldy. “It opened towards us. There was a painting or something covering it inside the room. The Princess stepped over a little wall to get out.”

“Think carefully. Was there a door opposite?”

“Yes,” said Sophie. “I shone my torch but we did not touch it. It was just like the other one.”

While they talked the Captain had been drawing a plan. “Does this look like your route?” she asked.

“Yes, just like it!” chorused the girls.

The twins then described the way to the Memorial. “The door opens outwards but there doesn’t seem to be any way to get back in unless the door is opened for you.”

The police looked at each other. “This needs to be investigated but thank you,” said the Captain, “you have been most helpful.”

Later that day, a woman was seen strolling around the memorial to the Grand Armee taking pictures and noting down some of the names of the soldiers listed. She could easily have been researching an ancestor who had died in the invasion of England two hundred years ago.

One particular bronze panel seemed to attract her attention. All of them, similar in size to doors, looked the same except this one. Her trained eye noticed a hexagonal-shaped hole in a feature on one side. A suitably sized key could be fitted in that hole, turned, and then the panel would swing open. The Wagley sisters had described the door and this was it. No one saw her produce a piece of plasticine, take an imprint of the hole then replace it in her bag. Her colleagues, if they chose this route, would need to bring the correct key.

That night a police wagon approached the memorial. Eight people climbed out and ran over. Their black clothes and balaclava hats rendered them unrecognisable. The earlier visitor had correctly identified the method required to open the panel so the eight were quickly inside. The wagon retired so as not to arouse suspicion.

Thanks to the accurate description of the passage and the undercroft, they came prepared. They had powerful torches which scanned the floor and walls looking for trip wires. They also had shields to deploy if they met opposition.

They proceeded noiselessly and with caution, scanning their route as they went. The passage widened when they passed a door on their right.

“Ossuary door,” their leader whispered. “Take special care. There will be alarms.” Sure enough, there was a trip wire. Low down, close to the ground, almost invisible.

“They are expecting us,” whispered their leader. “Proceed.” They stepped over the wire and pressed on.

“Another one,” an officer whispered. “Matt-black wire. I almost did not see it!”

There was the door in front of them, the silent non-creaking door described by Meldy and Sophie. Near the bottom was a flap.

“Looks like a cat flap!” whispered one.

It was eased open and a microphone was pushed through on the end of a telescopic pole. They had expected to bore a hole through this door but the flap made the operation much easier. One of the eight listened with earphones. “Someone is snoring,” he whispered. A guard must be sitting there waiting for them. They had probably expected to be woken by the trip alarms so were enjoying a quiet snooze.

“We are going in,” whispered the leader. “All torches on full beam, we will dazzle them.” The door was flung open and the guard was shocked awake just in time to be bound and gagged.

“Right!” said one of the visitors. “This is what you will do. You will tell us where your friends are!” The prisoner shook his head.

“Then we will take you with us. Loosen his legs so he can walk.”

They found the stairs with the corner and tried to persuade the guard to lead them upwards. He would not go any further.

“So, this is what you will do now” said the leader. “You will call for help to lure them down. That way you do not get injured by your friends. Understand?”

He did not look pleased but obeyed. “Aidez moi! Aidez moi!” he cried.

Footsteps were heard on the landing at the top, then the clatter of boots on the stone steps. The four were easily overpowered and handcuffed by the police at the bottom.

“Amateurs,” said one of the visitors.

The five were taken and attached to one of the large stone pillars that supported the vaulted ceiling. They were gagged so they could not call out. Two police officers remained to guard them. “This is chloroform,” one said. “You know what it will do so do not make us use it!”

The remaining six were quickly inside the Palace and through into a second room. There was no sign of anyone so they carried on till they found the series of rooms, identified by the Princess, where the Emperor might be held. There were at least two people in one because they could hear their voices. The princess had been right.

The five members of the team turned to their leader. Whether to open the door or not was to be her decision.

To be continued