

Chapter 20 Freeing the Emperor

A special police team had gained entry to the palace through what had once been a secret passage. They had taken five prisoners on the way, these were being guarded by two officers in the undercroft while the other six were now outside one of the palace rooms. There were voices within. Who was in there? Was it the Emperor?

“.....you do not have a choice,” they heard. Someone else said, “we have been through this a hundred times. We are in charge now so you need to accept reality!”

Then a third, more familiar voice said, “I want to see my daughter. Where is she?”

The leader of the team outside the door made a sign. This sign was clear in its meaning. They were to get ready to enter.

The six officers checked their truncheons, shields, handcuffs and other equipment. Light shone from under the door so there was no chance of dazzling the occupants. Surprise was their best weapon. Go in fast before they had a chance to react. They clipped their torches to their belts, one gently applied pressure to the door handle then, on a pre-arranged signal, they burst in.

There were five people in the room. The Emperor, seated, not a threat. Two grey haired startled and frightened men behind him and two younger belligerent looking guards with very quick reactions. Three team members went after the guards, two isolated the deputies who were offering no resistance while one freed the Emperor who was strapped to his chair.

The two guards had grabbed antique swords and were shouting while slashing at the police shields. These were lightweight and not designed to cope with such a determined onslaught so the three police officers knew they had to do something and fast.

“Get the two musketeers!” cried the leader. The two guarding the deputies left them and closed in on the two guards who were still waving their swords around like their lives depended on it. Now there were five police tackling these guards while the sixth moved the Emperor towards the door as well as watching the corner cowering deputies.

“Plan J!” shouted the leader. “Hit them in the face!” Three of the police produced soap sprays and tried to squirt them in the eyes, this would mean

they couldn't see anything for a while. If they couldn't see, they would not be so threatening.

They were still slashing away like demented Zorros but one officer managed to land a heavy blow with a truncheon. This provoked a furious reaction. He managed to hit one officer on the arm before another truncheon strike dropped him to the ground. On his own now, the other guard was sprayed in the face so he too was not a threat. With the two guards cuffed on the ground and the deputies still cowering in the corner, the police team took stock of the situation.

"We need to leave now!" cried the leader. The Emperor was able to walk but there were four people in this room who would raise the alarm given half a chance.

"Lock them in," said the leader, "there is no exit except this door and the key is outside." They double checked the door. Solid. It would do for now.

They turn off the light and retreat by torchlight. They hear voices in the distance so quicken their pace. Back to the room with the picture, following a trail of paper dropped on the way in. Open the picture frame, push the door behind and check the stairway. Clear. Shields at the ready, Emperor in the middle, they descend.

"Quick! We need to leave now, we are being followed!" They call to the two police guarding the five in the undercroft. There is a question from them about their prisoners.

"Leave them there, they will soon be found!" called out the team leader. Already there are sounds at the top of the stairs. Running towards the door to the not so secret passage, they scatter boxes, bikes and other objects behind them. Through the door, running down the passage, setting off alarms as they go. It does not matter now. Onward they rush, Emperor panting along with them, finally exiting in the memorial to the Grand Armee.

Now they could breathe again. A signal from a torch brought the police wagon out of the gloom. Only then did Captain Duplessis notice she had been injured. Her left arm had received a glancing blow from one of the swords but she had not realised this in all the excitement.

The Emperor seemed dazed by the speed of his release but was full of praise for his brave rescuers. They had gone into the unknown and put themselves in danger for his sake. He would not forget it. He was pleased to hear his daughter was also free.

They climbed into the police wagon and were taken a short distance to a darkened street. Here, by prior arrangement, a large furniture wagon was waiting with its four horses stamping and shuffling in the gloom. Raoul's uncle Oskar, their trusted driver, was pleased to see them. The Emperor was put in the back with two guards and he was taken out of the city to a rural farm house. Free at last.

Princess Augustine was still at the Court Manteau's house. There were ten police officers outside and, across the road, a student encampment. By now the police and campers had a good rapport and they made sure the police knew who was in their camp.

They were all wondering whether something else would happen. Visitors came and went, identity cards were checked against daily visitor lists. Everything seemed in order. On one occasion two men were seen looking at the garden wall but they soon left when approached by a police officer.

The next morning, Princess Augustine was in the stables tending to Diogenes. Francois had left with Madame, Antoinette, the twins and Amelie in one of the carriages, off to do some shopping. Soon after they left, a delivery of straw came. The driver and his assistant's identities were carefully checked, no problem there because they had been before. They were allowed through into the yard. The driver expertly manoeuvred the large wagon round to its unloading position, the brakes were applied and the two men climbed down.

Three more men suddenly appeared on top of the load. They jumped down, bound and gagged the two then put them in the coach house across the yard. Marcel, who had been in the stables, heard something and signalled to the Princess while he went out to investigate. He was grabbed and tied up as well. Meldy and Sophie were playing in the loft above the stables and saw Marcel's signal so they hid in some hay behind a pile of turnips.

The three men ran to the house and grabbed Stephanie who just happened to appear in front of them.

"Where is she? Where is the fake Princess?" they shouted.

"Get out of here!" she shouted back as she struggled to free herself. A well aimed kick managed to catch one on his shin bone. Next came Sylvie from the kitchen. Seeing Stephanie in danger, she was back in the kitchen to grab a large poker. With a banshee shriek, she assailed the unfortunate man who had to let Stephanie go to defend himself. The other two, taken by surprise,

had to come to his aid. Stephanie was now able to jump on the back of the largest and twist his ears so completely that he cried out in pain.

Princess Augustine emerged. Realising others were in danger because of her, she ran to the house so that the three men could see her. They pushed Sylvie aside, shook off Stephanie and chased her back to the stables.

Making soothing noises, she unbolted Diogenes's stall and went round behind him. He was happy for her to do this but when three angry men appeared, well, that was too much. He reared up on his strong hind legs and aimed a flurry of hooves in their direction.

Meldy and Sophie, up in the loft, could see the men shouting at Diogenes.

"Leave him alone, you, you dog breath!" shouted Meldy. One of them looked up in surprise only to be hit in the face by a large turnip thrown by Sophie. Meldy quickly joined in. Turnips rained down on the men while horses hooves came at them from the front.

Inside the house, Stephanie had run to the front door and shouted to the police. Five large police officers ran through the yard to the stables. Soon it was all over and the bruised intruders were led away in handcuffs.

Meldy and Sophie climbed down the ladder from the loft and the Princess emerged from behind Diogenes.

"Good boy!" she said as she found him a special treat.

"Diogenes! You were brilliant!" chorused the girls.

The police questioned the crew of the delivery wagon but were satisfied with their story. They were innocent. Someone knew which load was coming and had alerted the kidnappers.

"They must have known someone would call the police," said Stephanie.

"Yes," replied the Princess. "I think they had planned to use me as a human shield. What other explanation could there be?"

"I hit one in the eye with a turnip," sang Sophie.

"I called them dog breath," sang Meldy.

“Sylvie and Stephanie,” said the Princess, “you were both incredible. What can I say?” Marcel was then untied. “Thank you,” she said, “the question is, will they try again?”

“I think they probably will your highness,” replied Marcel, “the survival of their regime depends on returning you to captivity.”

“You are right Marcel, I think we will have to have a police presence inside the house. Your warning stopped me walking out of the stables when the delivery arrived. Thank you. The outcome could have been very different if I had.”

“Your highness, I am glad to have been of service,” he replied.

“Your highness,” mused Meldy, “they must be stupid if they thought you’re a fake Princess!”

“Esmeralda, although they were told that, we do not know whether they really believed it.”

The Emperor woke with a start and wondered where he was. Then it all came back. The daring rescue, the back of the furniture van and the discussions with the police officers, the muffled introductions at the safe house and the peace and quiet of the isolated rural location. He was staying in a farm house down the end of a long track. The couple lived on their own, their children working far away in France. So no one to gossip or inadvertently disclose his location.

At breakfast he asked about their farm. “Your Majesty,” said the husband, “there is discontent in the countryside. Our produce is of excellent quality and we could export it to England if only the borders were to open. We could get a very good price there.”

“Your Majesty,” continued his wife, “all our neighbours say the same thing. When Princess Augustine spoke of open borders we were overjoyed. We thought things would look up. Our son and daughter could be here with us but now we might have to sell our farm.”

Meanwhile, Alain Court Manteau was in the University’s biology department when a student approached him. “Monsieur Court Manteau,” he said, “you do not know me but I have a message for you.”

Alain looked around to see if anyone was listening then looked again at the student. Was this some sort of trap? He knew some were spying for the transitional council so a quick appraisal gave him vital information. Not smartly dressed, rural accent and clutching a bag of books which implied they were too expensive to lose.

“Yes,” he replied, “how detailed is your message?”

“Can we go somewhere private?” asked the student.

Alain looked again. He did seem familiar, he must have seen him on the recent demonstration. They walked outside into the quadrangle where students were crossing in random directions, talking earnestly or laughing over some private joke. It was a safe space to talk.

“My family have a farm Monsieur,” said the student. “Times are hard for farmers so I will soon have to leave the university because there is no more money. Now we have heard the transitional council want to take our land away.”

“I have heard the same so how can I help?”

The student glanced around then continued, “information has come to my family. A big countryside march is planned.” His voice dropped, “they will come to the city.”

Now Alain looked around. “Get out a book,” he whispered.

They studied a random page as if Alain was offering advice. “Where are they planning to go?” he whispered.

“To the square in front of the Chamber of Advisors.”

Alain knew the Transitional Council were soon to meet there. A large demonstration outside would be of huge symbolic importance. “They must arrive tomorrow,” he said, “I will organise students at this end. We will meet at the Royal Bridge over the River Couronne and march with you for the last mile.”

The student thanked him and left. Alain realised he had to act quickly so he hurried to the education department. Stephanie had made some friends there, he would start with them. After that the geography department, the history department and lots of others. They had no time to loose.

There was a lot of sympathy for the rural population in the Departement de Londres so it was easy to recruit students for the march. The Transitional Council had portrayed the royal family as parasites. But who were the real parasites?

When the day of protest dawned, students and sympathisers all over the city got ready. Stephanie, Antoinette and the twins went out to the campus but they had to dissuade Meldy and Sophie from joining them.

“Why can’t we come too?” Meldy had asked.

“It might get a bit rough,” said Kick. “Anyway, you have a really important job to do here.”

“We do?” asked Sophie.

“You have to help protect the Princess. They might try to kidnap her again so make sure you have a ready pile of turnips!”

Captain Duplessis, acting on a hunch, had decided to post a police officer in the house. He familiarised himself with all the possible entry points including the garden wall which Meldy and Sophie had frequently climbed. He soon became friendly with Francois who had taken him around when he first arrived.

Alain had been the day before and had suggested some extra precautions.

“I know some of the students in the encampment outside,” he had said.

“Why not invite them into the courtyard? Armed with pitchforks and spades they would be a formidable opposition to any further kidnap attempts.”

Francois, the new coachman, did not think it necessary. “With the police presence in the yard we can manage. Why do we need anyone else?”

Many of the marchers from the countryside had been camping south of the city overnight. In the morning more people joined and their ranks swelled as they approached the other side of the river Couronne. The student and city marchers gave a rousing cheer as they crossed the bridge.

Alain, waiting with Antoinette and the twins, was surprised by their numbers. “There must be thousands of them,” he observed. “Where is Stephanie?”

“She is with some of the women over there,” replied Popster. “I think she would like to be a student as well.”

“She should,” said Kick. “Could she afford to study?”

“That could be a problem,” replied Alain. “Stephanie’s family comes from a rural part of France so there probably is not much money.”

“But Princess Augustine wants to change that doesn’t she?”

“Yes, but it will take time to organise. I think Stephanie has the potential so hopefully something can be arranged.”

The sea of marchers flowed to the square outside the Chamber of Advisors. The Transitional Council were meeting inside when someone rushed in to tell them what was going on. “Thousands of people, pouring into the square! We are trapped!”

“Lock the front doors!” someone shouted, “there is an exit at the back!”

The chanting outside was so loud they could hear it in the chamber. “Lock up the criminals! Hands off our land!” and, “open the borders!” the demonstrators cried.

A man in old tweeds and a cap mounted the steps in front of the chamber then turned to face the crowd. He raised his arms to ask for quiet. The crowd below settled down to hear what he had to say.

“Citizens, the Transitional Council kidnapped me, your Emperor, and my daughter Princess Augustine. They said we had fled the country which of course we will never do, so, here I am, rescued from their clutches by a brave group of men and women led by Captain Duplessis.”

He continued, “Captain Duplessis also rescued my daughter..., excuse me, someone wishes to have a word...”

A police Lieutenant whispered something in his ear. Surprise showed on his face. “I stand corrected. My daughter was rescued by a group of brave children, three of whom are visitors from England.”

He turned to the doors leading into the building. “Members of the Transitional Council, I accuse you of lying and dishonesty. I accuse you of kidnap and intimidation. I accuse you of plunder. I accuse you of trying to take land that belongs to our farmers.”

He continued, "If I am wrong, why not present your side of the story? We give you that chance, a chance you denied my daughter and myself."

No one came out. At that precise moment they were climbing out of a rear window.

To be continued