

Chapter 3 Madame Bourg Odiesse comes to collect the sisters

The three Wagley sisters were still in a police station somewhere in the city of Londres. At first their story wasn't believed but a polygraph test showed they were telling the truth. Apart from questioning the legitimate status of Emperor Napoleon the Tenth, they had got on well with their interviewer, Captain Duplessis. She was impressed by their intelligence.

"You must be hungry," she said, "I will find you something to eat. Follow me." She led them out of the room, down a narrow corridor and into a cafeteria. "You can sit there. They will bring you one of our local specialties."

"Look at that map on the wall!" exclaimed Popster once the Captain had left.

It showed the south east corner of England. Only a lot of it wasn't England. It was marked the 'Departement de Londres' and its boundary was clearly shown. This went from the mouth of the Thames, circled round London then down to the Isle of Wight. The area within the boundary was coloured green and brown. Outside, the rest of England was a featureless grey. As if it was of no importance.

They stared. Somewhere, in the grey 'unimportant' area, was their village but if they went back there, what would they find? The England shown on the map was not their England. The twins looked at Meldy.

"I want to go home!" she whispered.

"So do we," said Kick.

"We've got to do our utmost to get back," added Popster. "It may take some time but meanwhile we have to stick together."

"Yes, and be brave," said Kick.

"Meldy," added Popster, "You will be brave, won't you."

Meldy, still looking worried, nodded.

Someone appeared with some food. "Tarte Lafayette" they said as they dumped the tray on the table. It looked like a very thin crust medium sized pizza with little bits of meat and vegetables. They were too hungry to worry about the ingredients. There was also some 'jus de pomme' which turned out to be apple juice. They ate in silence and no one talked to them. When they had finished, Kick remarked,

“We could walk out of here, who would know? Or care?”

“Where would we go and what would we do?” asked Popster. “The Captain said we can’t go back to England.”

“She said some do,” replied Kick. “But how? And how do they get identity cards and why on earth do they need them?”

“Well, she said they’re required so people must get fakes I suppose,” replied Popster as she looked again at the map on the wall. “Anyway, we have to get a lot more information before we can make any sensible decisions.” Meldy hadn’t said anything. She was still looking at the map. After half an hour, Captain Duplessis returned.

“Here are your identity cards and I have positive news. I have made some phone calls and it appears that some families would like to have you as resident companions for their daughters. You appear to be well educated so I think you can make yourselves useful.”

“What about Meldy, I mean Esmeralda?” asked Popster.

“You will all stay together. There is no need to separate you. I have contacted one family who had a companion but she did not work out. They have a daughter of your age and she has a sister Esmeralda’s age. Their mother will collect you in an hour and I will visit you from time to time to see how you are getting on. Of course, we will need to do this until you are twenty one years old.”

“Twenty one?” asked a surprised Popster.

“Yes. That is when you will become an adult.”

“How did you know our ages?” asked Popster who had looked at her identity card.

“Our polygraph machine calculated your birth dates. Your actual ages do not matter. So you now have new birthdays. We find people are not that truthful anyway.” She left the room leaving behind three confused and concerned sisters. Kick and Popster were both wondering ‘what happened to their last companion?’ while Meldy was still trying to make sense of the map. She turned to the twins.

“What if they don’t like us?” she asked.

“Well, you heard what the Captain said,” replied Kick. “It’s up to us.”

Eventually, the Captain came to collect them. “Madame Bourg Odiesse will soon be here,” she said. “Her eldest daughter is called Evelina and their youngest Natalina.” She continued, “You should address Madame Bourg Odiesse as Madame. Of course you should address her daughters as Miss Evelina and Miss Natalina but they should eventually, I think, allow you to ‘miss out the Miss.’ ” Here she laughed at her own joke. “Assuming they like you. I advise you to do your best in this position.”

She carried on, “remember to keep your identity cards with you at all times when out in the city but Esmeralda should not be allowed to leave their property on her own.”

In an hour the mother came in to collect them. “Thank you so much!” she gushed at Captain Duplessis. “They will be really comfortable with us, my daughters are so looking forward to having some new friends.”

Captain Duplessis closed the sister’s file and said they could leave. “We will visit you in three months,” she said, “but I am sure Madame Bourg Odiesse will look after you properly.”

They were taken outside to meet the daughters who were neatly dressed but their clothes didn’t really fit their ages. Evelina was dressed as someone younger while Natalina had almost grown out of hers. Both were wearing pink ribbons tied in bows. The mother prodded Evelina who woke as if from a daydream.

“Mummy,” she recited, “we are really lucky to have such nice girls to keep us company.”

“Thank you Evelina,” said Kick who was making an effort to be friendly.

“You are Esmeralda?” asked Natalina with what Popster thought was somewhat lacking in enthusiasm.

“Yes but my friends call me Meldy.”

“They do? Why is that?”

“Because my English name is Esmerelda.”

“But you are not....”

“Natalina,” interjected their mother, “remember what we said earlier?”

“Oh. Of course I am sorry you were taken away from your home.”

The carriage had been parked in the courtyard. The two horses were shuffling and snorting in their nose bags which were removed before Madame climbed up on the bench to take the reins. The five girls clambered inside and soon they were off. Once out in the street, a wall of noise hit them. There were clattering horses' hooves, people talking in loud voices, creaking carts and the sound of people whistling tunes which they didn't recognise. And there was something else, the two girls were definitely changing their tone.

“Why were you kidnapped?” asked Evelina.

“I don't know really,” replied Popster.

“You talk funny,” said Natalina.

“How do you mean?” asked Kick.

“Well you say ‘don't’,” said Evelina. “That must mean ‘do not’.”

“Yes but no one says that,” replied Meldy.

“Sloppy talk,” said Natalina.

“What's sloppy about it?”

“You did it again. Just then. You said ‘whots’.”

“Why are you so scruffy?” asked Evelina.

“We were, er,” said Popster, “grabbed while we were out gardening.”

“What did they want with you?” asked Evelina, “did they want your money?”

“We didn't have any,” said Meldy. “But we had squirrel food.”

“What?” asked Evelina.

“That's what they were after. Squirrel food.”

Both the girls stared at Meldy as if she was mad. Kick and Popster stifled a smirk.

“Surely squirrel food, whatever that is, is not that valuable?” asked Evelina. The twins turned to see what Meldy would say next.

“Of course it is. It costs lots and lots. Our squirrels are really big and fierce and they know where we live so we have to feed them or they’ll come and get us.”

“Did they kidnap you?” asked Natalina.

“No but we suspect the kidnappers were paid by them,” added Kick as she stifled another smirk.

“How did they pay them?” asked Evelina, “with squirrel food?”

“We don’t know,” said Popster, “but we think the National Squirrel Observation Force will be looking into it by now.”

“I hope they don’t all get eaten like our neighbour,” said Meldy.

“So those little red animals grow really big where you live?” asked a confused Natalina.

“I see what you are doing,” exclaimed Evelina, “you are playing with us!”

“Yes,” replied Kick. “We’re a long way from home, we’re tired and looking forward to a lie down. I don’t think we appreciated being picked on for the way we talk.”

The two sisters looked at each other with a trace of a sneer passing between them. “Well,” said Evelina, “I hope you like horses.”

“Horses?” replied Meldy, “of course we like them.”

“Good. You will be sleeping with them!”

“But the policewoman said....” started Popster,

“Who cares what she said. We do not want you sleeping in our house because you are too scruffy.”

“But....” said Meldy.

“You can earn your keep by waiting on us and if you complain you will not be fed. Our servants all left and we cannot find any more.”

“You can’t keep us here,” pointed out Kick.

“We lock the gate and our boundary wall is topped with broken glass so I wish you luck!”

“The police said....” ventured Popster.

“They do not care. Do not worry, behave and you will be fed.”

“But that’s slavery!” said Meldy.

“Yes, I suppose it is. You look like you have had an easy life so now is the time to start working. Three months will do you good.”

“I ha....,” started Meldy but Popster grabbed her arm as if to say, ‘not now, we’ll think of something.’

The family had reached their lair and Madame jumped down to open the gate. This allowed them to pass the side of the house and turn in the stable yard at the rear. Madame then appeared to rush back to secure the site.

“Get out,” commanded Evelina, “and lower the step for us.” Pointing to the stables she said, “you can get to your room by going in that door over there. You will need to climb the ladder, you can do that I suppose.” Another sneer passed between them.

The door in question led into the stables, so they were not joking. The sisters could see a small window in the sloping roof, under which they assumed they would be living until they could make good their escape.

“Oh,” said Evelina, “see that bell?” They looked across to the house and saw a large bronze bell hanging on a bracket. “When you hear that you will come. That is all for now. Enjoy your rest because you start tomorrow.”

Popster looked across at the mother who was tending the horses and ignoring them. There was to be no help from that quarter so the three sisters did as they were directed. By now they were too tired to resist so they climbed the ladder into their living space. They were greeted by three camp beds, some chairs and a table with a metal container on top. Meldy lifted the lid to see some bread, cheese, a bottle of water and some glasses. After a bite and a drink, they collapsed onto the camp beds and slept for many hours.

Kick woke with a start. There was a tolling sound like a church bell coming from somewhere. She sat up, looked around and wondered where she was.

Then it hit her. 'We're in a stable and there's those nasty evil girls.... What were their names? Evelina and.... Natalina, that was it. Evelina, Evil - lena. Natalina, Nasty - lina....'

"What's that noise?" asked a very groggy Popster.

"Don't you remember? It's Evil - lena and Nasty - lina expecting us to start slaving."

"Will you go or shall I?"

"Meldy's still asleep so come on, we might as well find out what the score is."

To be continued....