

Chapter 6 The Sisters Settle in

Normally, Meldy would have loved to ride in an open carriage, especially an elegant landau which was drawn by four magnificent black horses. But that would have been then. This was now, only what a now it was. London was Londres and its streets were filled with horse drawn vehicles. These same streets were covered in horse manure, the manure attracted swarms of flies and they attracted scores of birds called flycatchers.

Madame Court Manteau chatted away as they proceeded in stately fashion down the street. She still greeted pedestrians and sometimes people in other carriages although, as the twins continued to notice, none as yet had been as elegant as theirs.

“Marcel!” she cried as she waved excitedly. “It’s Alain! Alain! Over here! He is my nephew,” she explained.

Alain shuffled over, wiping his hands on a rather dirty looking rag. He was tall, thin and looked rather serious.

“Bonjour Aunt Aurelie!” he called out as he approached.

“Alain, I want you to meet Catherine, Patrice and Esmeralda. They are coming to live with us.”

Alain glanced across at the sisters and did a double take when he realised two were identical. He proceeded to turn a rather nice shade of pink.

“I hope I may come to visit you again soon, Aunt Aurelie.”

“I will insist that you do, Alain! You do not come often enough!”

“Well, my research is reaching a critical stage and I am often out in the field, or I suppose I should say, the street.”

“What are you researching?” asked Kick.

Alain looked surprised. People didn’t usually ask him about his work when they saw his dirty rag.

“At the moment I am studying a fly that lays its eggs in horse manure. Of course we eventually get more flies, lots of them.”

“Is there just one type?” asked Kick.

“Good question. I have identified four different species.”

“Talking of flies and eggs, what happens between those two stages,” asked Popster, “in the intermediate stage, if one can call it that?”

“A very good question, yes, an excellent question. One can certainly call it the intermediate stage. There was no record of anyone ever asking what happens, then I came along. The eggs hatch into maggots.”

“The maggots must grow quite a lot before they turn into flies,” pointed out Popster.

“Yes, that is where the horse manure comes in, or should I say goes into the maggots!”

“Could they be a source of protein?” asked Kick.

Alain was looking impressed. “Tante Aurelie, where did you find these intelligent sisters?”

“Their misfortune has been our gain, Alain. They were kidnapped in England and somehow brought into the Departement.”

Alain turned back to the twins. “I am sorry to hear that, but to answer your question Catherine, or is it Patrice, we think they could be such a source. Extraction of protein is another area of research at my university.”

“Does that mean,” mused Meldy, “that we will have to eat flies? I don’t think I’d like that!”

Sophie laughed. The twins hadn’t seen her laugh before so they felt it was an encouraging sign.

“Esmeralda, we are looking at ways to disguise the origins of the protein. If it is mixed with natural flavours you will not know where it came from.”

“But wouldn’t there have to be something on the packet that said, ‘Warning, contains flies’?”

“A warning on the packet?” asked Alain, “I do not understand.”

“Well it could taste yummy, I suppose,” added Meldy.

“Yummy?” asked Alain, “what is yummy?”

“It’s when something tastes so good that you can’t stop eating it!” said Meldy.

“Like ice cream?” asked Sophie.

“Yes, ice cream is super yummy!” replied an enthusiastic Meldy.

“Super, as in soup?” asked Sophie who looked a bit confused by the link between this and ice cream.

“Super means excellent or the best, like Superman.”

“Who is he?” asked a very confused Sophie.

Meldy realised this wasn’t going anywhere so she said, “oh, he’s just a character in a story.”

Alain promised to pay them a visit soon then returned to the pile of horse manure. Madame instructed Marcel to continue on their way then she turned to the twins.

“I think you will be an asset in our household. You must be very well educated. Antoinette needs more English conversation and she needs to be challenged. If you can do that, Monsieur and I will be very grateful.”

“Both our parents went to University Madame,” replied Popster. “They always made a point of discussing things with us.”

‘Our parents,’ thought Meldy as she looked at the passing horses. ‘They must be really missing us by now, will we ever see them again?’

The sisters were surprised by the size of the Court Manteau’s property. There was a square entrance passage through to the left of the grand house and to the right was a high wall enclosing some luxuriant looking trees and bushes.

The carriage passed through the passage with an echoing clatter from the horse’s hooves, then it stopped in the large interior courtyard. They could see some stables to the rear and storage for carriages and carts to the left. The house was ‘L’ shaped and it extended on their right down towards the back of the yard. Kick had noticed there was no gate at the entrance, a comforting sign.

A young female ran out to meet them. “Amelie!” called out Madame, “these are the Wagley sisters, Catherine, Patrice and Esmeralda. Can you show them to their room, please.”

“Yes, Madame,” said Amelie as she looked at the newcomers. There was no hostility in that look, just inquisitiveness mixed with kindness.

“Hello Amelie,” said the twins while Meldy clambered out behind them and followed her sisters into the house. Amelie took them up a grand staircase, then a normal looking staircase finally up some narrower steps leading to the attic.

“This is my room,” she said, “and I will open your door for you.”

The sisters entered and looked around. There was a dormer window facing the courtyard, a large closet, a chest of drawers and three beds. A maroon coloured rug lay on the wooden floor in the middle of the room. Amelie was still hovering in the doorway.

‘She looks lonely,’ thought Popster as she smiled at her. Encouraged by this friendly overture, Amelie asked “Where are you from?”

“England,” replied Popster.

“How did you get here?”

“We were kidnapped.”

Amelie paused as if to digest this information. Suddenly she blurted out, “I hope we can be friends!”

“We hope so too!” replied a rather relieved Popster. “Do you share your room as well?”

“Not now but I used to share with Stephanie.”

“Has she gone somewhere else?” asked Kick.

“I do not know where she is. She promised to meet me in the city just over a week ago but never came. Then she did not return to work and I have not seen or heard from her since. I thought she was my friend.”

“Amelie,” said Popster, “don’t worry, I’m sure she’ll contact you soon.”

Meanwhile, Meldy had claimed the bed by the window overlooking the courtyard. She could see the horses being uncoupled before being led back to the stables.

"I wanted that one!" cried Kick.

"But I got here first! Why can't I have it? It's smaller than those over there anyway!"

"Let her have it!" said Popster, "she can watch the horses. We can be together over here!"

"Do you like horses, Esmeralda?" enquired Amelie, "I can take you to see them, if you like."

"Yes please! Can we go now?"

"Amelie, thank you but we need to settle in first," said Kick, "maybe you can take her later?"

"We have put some clothes in the closet for you to try. Some of them might fit. The bathroom is down on the next level."

"Do you have any toothbrushes?" asked Popster. "We have to make sure Esmeralda cleans her teeth regularly."

"I see you really are her sisters. If you need any help, I will be in my room."

"Thank you Amelie," said Kick, "we'll see you soon."

When they were on their own, the twins discussed their day.

"Well," said Popster, "Madame and Amelie seem nice. I wonder what Antoinette's like."

"I hope she's friendlier than Sophie," replied Kick.

"Sophie's nice," said Meldy. "She likes puppies. And Alain must be nice if he likes insects."

"If you say so Meldy," said Kick, "bugs are your department."

"I have a good feeling about them," mused Popster. "Monsieur Court Manteau was polite and Madame seems really natural. You know, not like that Bourg woman. Now if we can get on alright with Antoinette...."

Later, Amelie brought up something for them to eat. Once again, they were hungry so they ate in silence. They certainly had a lot to digest.

That night it took Meldy some time to get to sleep. Moonlight crept into the room and she could hear distant citywide noises. An owl hooted while the horses shuffled and snorted in their stalls. There was someone, somewhere, singing something just like a lullaby. She sat up in bed so she could hear it better. It sounded like a boy's voice and it seemed to be coming from the stables. While he sang, the shuffling of the horses subsided and eventually stopped altogether.

The next thing she knew, the birds were chirping. It was morning.

Amelie came to collect them and took them down to breakfast in a big room next to the kitchen. There was a large wooden table in the middle and they sat opposite a stack of dishes and cutlery. She brought them some croissants and asked what they wanted to drink. They all chose orange juice.

Meldy sat and looked at her croissant. "Don't you have any porridge?" she asked.

"Porridge, what is porridge?" asked Amelie.

"It's cooked oats, isn't it?" she asked her sisters.

"Yes," said Popster, "they've been squashed first."

"You mean rolled," added Kick.

Amelie looked confused and disappeared into the kitchen. Soon she returned, followed by the cook.

"Sylvie," said Amelie, "here are Catherine, Patrice and Esmeralda."

"Bonjour mes petites!" said the cook with a welcoming smile. The twins explained what porridge was and she said she'd try to find some then disappeared into the kitchen.

Meldy smothered her croissant with apricot jam and ate it. At least she liked the jam.

Amelie, who had breakfasted earlier, reappeared.

“Miss Antoinette is in the morning room,” she said to the twins. “Esmeralda, Miss Sophie is in the garden. I will take you all when you are ready.”

“Amelie, I thought we were going to see the horses!” replied a rather disappointed Meldy.

“I must work now but we can visit them later.”

Meldy watched her leave then turned to look at the courtyard outside the window. She could see a stable boy leading a large black horse round the yard.

‘He must be the boy I heard last night!’ she thought. She was about to tell the twins when she jumped up and ran to the window. Following behind the horse she could see a little black foal with a white patch on its forehead.

The twins came to look. “Isn’t it adorable,” said Popster.

“Can’t we go out?” asked Meldy.

“Later,” said Kick. “Remember what the Captain said, we’ve got a job to do and it’s up to us. We have to earn our keep and this seems so much better than the lair of the Odious Bourgs!”

To be continued