

Chapter 7 The twins meet Antoinette

The Wagley sisters had enjoyed a comfortable night and had recently finished their first breakfast at the Court Manteau's grand house. "And we got fed without doing any work!" observed Popster.

"Let's go and get ready," said Kick, "before we meet Antoinette. Meldy, you should go outside and find Sophie." Meldy didn't look that enthusiastic because she wanted to see the horses.

"Meldy we have to do this," repeated Kick when they were in their attic room. "We've got a nice place to live and we're being fed. What option do we have? You don't want to go back to Nasty Lina's do you?"

When ready, they went down to find Amelie. "Have you heard from Stephanie?" asked Popster as they walked towards the morning room.

"Not a word," she replied, "Madame has just asked me too."

Once inside, she announced them to Antoinette before taking Meldy out to find Sophie. The sun was streaming in through the windows onto Sophie's sister who was in the middle of a large sofa, surrounded by cushions. She did not look happy and it was obvious to the twins she had been crying. She didn't speak but they thought they should sit down anyway.

"Miss Antoinette, Madame said you were at the palace yesterday," ventured Kick.

"We would really like to hear about it," added Popster.

Still no reply. "Miss Antoinette," asked Kick, "would you prefer to be left alone for a while?" When this failed to elicit a response they rose to leave the room. Antoinette still didn't say anything so they thought it best to try later.

"What do we do now?" asked Popster when they were back in their own room.

"I feel like a lie down," sighed Kick, "I thought Antoinette wanted a companion."

"But does she want two of us?" asked Popster. "I suppose...." She stopped because there was a tap on their door.

"Good morning Madame," they chorused as Madame's head appeared.

“Good morning Catherine and Patrice,” she said, “I hope you had a comfortable night. I thought I should tell you something about Antoinette and Sophie. They are both missing their brother and have been depressed since he left. He used to play the piano and Antoinette would sing for us which we all enjoyed so much. Captain Duplessis told me you are musical so Monsieur and I would be very grateful if you could encourage her to sing again.”

“Madame,” said Kick, “we will try our best. May we ask what happened to him?”

Madame lowered her voice, “I am sorry but there are some things we must not talk about. One day perhaps, but not now. Also, please could you tell Esmeralda that Sophie needs a friend too.”

“Madame,” said Popster, “we’ll explain things and we’re sure she’ll try her best.”

“I am sure she will. She certainly seems to be very personable.”

“Oh she is Madame,” replied Kick, “and she’s the one that got us out of Madame Bourg’s house.”

“So I heard from Captain Duplessis. Such a regrettable situation but their loss is our gain. I explained all this to Antoinette then I told her how you were kidnapped and brought from your own home. She has apologised to me so if you go back I am sure she will be pleased to see you.”

“Thank you Madame,” replied Popster, “we will do as you wish. Catherine could try playing the piano and maybe....”

“Thank you. It is our dearest wish to hear her singing again.” Madame then left them to it so they went back down to the morning room. Choosing two chairs, they watched while Antoinette dabbed her eyes and wiped her nose. She passed a hand through her curly hair and cleared her throat. They were trying to think of something to say but she spoke first.

“I was really looking forward to going to the palace again but Prince Louis virtually ignored me. He was very polite but he was always talking to other people. I hardly saw Princess Augustine.”

“Er, Miss Antoinette, how many people were there?” asked Popster who was at a loss for what else to say.

“More than twenty five I think. All young people.”

“Miss Antoinette, did the hosts know all their guests beforehand?” asked Kick.

“Well no, but...”

“Miss Antoinette, maybe they just had to be sociable, to spread themselves around the room a bit,” suggested Popster. “they’ll probably get in touch soon,” She was also thinking, ‘at least she’s talking to us and she doesn’t look hostile. What else can we say?’ Fortunately, she continued to talk.

“At one point the piano was played and someone sang. Prince Louis praised her voice in glowing terms but, although she was good, she was not that good. She had trouble reaching some of the higher notes.”

“Maybe he was just being polite,” ventured Kick. “In his position he would have to be very careful what he says.” She looked around and noticed a piano on one side of the room. It was covered in music scores and the lid was closed. “Miss Antoinette, do you play the piano?”

“It was wonderful when our brother Antoine was here. He could play really well and I would sing and.....but he has gone. I cannot find the enthusiasm for that now.”

“What happened Miss Antoinette?” asked Popster. “Can you talk about it?”

Antoinette lowered her voice. “Antoine left because he wanted change. Prince Louis and Princess Augustine agree with him but their father, the Emperor, is very conservative. He is not really old so I do not think change will come for many years yet.”

“Master Antoine left? Did he go across the border?” asked Kick.

“Many of our young people do. They either escape to England or they go to France. Antoine is in Liverpool. He sends letters to France and then they are repackaged and sent on to us here.”

“Liverpool? Why Liverpool Miss Antoinette?” asked Popster.

“As you know, it is the capital of England. Lots of our young people go there.”

“Miss Antoinette, why are his letters sent to France first?” asked Kick.

“Mother said you came from England. Surely you must know there is no communication across our border. We do not know how he got out but that is probably for the best.”

“Miss Antoinette, why do you say that?” asked Popster.

“We could be questioned because he broke the law. They could use the lie detector. It is better not to know.”

“They used one on me,” said Popster. “They didn’t believe our story but of course we were telling the truth.”

“But I thought you were kidnapped?”

“Er, yes,” said Kick. ‘Better not talk about what really happened,’ she thought.

“Miss Antoinette, why are there no cars here?” asked Popster, “They have them in England, don’t they?”

“But you know they do. We do not have them here because many years ago the son of Napoleon the fifth was killed in an accident. The Emperor banned them from that day forward. Then he banned trucks as well. It is now part of our tradition but the ‘Modernisers’ do not agree with it. At least our farmland is very fertile with all the horse manure!”

“Which side are you on?” asked Popster.

“I agree with Antoine. Change must come. My cousin Alain...”

“We met him yesterday,” interjected Kick.

“He used to be a ‘Traditionalist’, but now I am not so sure. He still thinks horse manure is valuable and we need much more of it. He is young but he is well respected at the university.”

‘Haven’t you got enough manure already?’ thought the twins.

Meldy was sitting on a seat with Sophie. She was looking at a lawn surrounded by flowers, shrubs and behind those, trees. From the other side of the garden wall came sounds of horse drawn traffic.

“Miss Sophie, what was that present from your father?” she asked.

“A silver locket with a necklace. It is very nice but I did so want a puppy!”

“Why can’t you have one?”

“He says it would frighten the horses. Look, that is a ‘merle noir’,” she said as she pointed to a bird at the other end of the lawn.

“We call it a ‘blackbird’,” replied Meldy.

“Well, it is black and it is a bird, so it is a sensible name.”

“That was a ‘song thrush’,” observed Meldy, “that blackbird just chased it away.”

“Why not call it a ‘brown spotty’ bird?” laughed Sophie.

“What’s a song thrush in French?”

“A ‘grive musicienne’, a musical thrush.”

“Blackbirds are musical too,” observed Meldy. “I wonder why they are called by their colour while song thrushes are called musical? Most garden birds are musical aren’t they? Look, there’s a red squirrel. I’ve never seen one before.”

“All squirrels are red are they not?”

“We have grey ones where we live. I like them but these little ones are so sweet. Look at his tufty ears!”

“Grey squirrels? I have never heard of them.”

“What’s your favourite bird?” asked Meldy.

“A ‘rouge gorge’,” replied Sophie without hesitation.

“Rouge is red isn’t it?” mused Meldy, “so it must be a robin.”

“Robin? What does it mean?”

“I don’t know but it works well in poems and songs. You can rhyme other words with it.”

“Rhyme?”

“Yes, like ‘the red red robin comes bob bob bobbin along’. It’s a song. My mother used to sing it to me.”

“Do you miss your mother? I know I would miss mine!”

“Yes and I miss my father too, but I’m so glad I’m here with my sisters.”

“Can you sing the robin song for me?”

“I’ll try!” she sang a few bars.

“It reminds me of Antoine,” said Sophie. “He sang and played the piano. Antoinette used to sing as well but now she does not.”

They sat in silence and watched the birds.

In the morning room Antoinette was still sitting on the sofa and the twins were trying to get to know her better. Kick had looked through some music on the top of the piano and had found a book of French folk songs.

“These look good,” she said. “Do you know them, Miss Antoinette?”

“Yes, but I do not feel like singing. Antoine used to play them and they will make me sad.”

“Miss Antoinette,” asked Kick, “do you mind if I play one of them? Do you want to sing Patrice?”

“Alright, but my French isn’t very good.”

Kick started to play while Popster attempted to sing but she stumbled over some of the French pronunciations. Kick thought to herself, ‘she’s doing it on purpose.’

“Patrice,” said Antoinette, “your emphasis is not right.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Antoinette, can you help me?” Antoinette left her place on the sofa and came over to the piano.

“How does this line sound?” asked Popster.

Antoinette sang the line, then another line. Kick started to play better while Antoinette continued to sing. Popster listened intently to the words and the pronunciation, then her singing improved.

“Miss Antoinette! That was amazing!” they both exclaimed when she had finished.

“Please call me Antoinette. Yes, these songs are very beautiful.”

“You have such a wonderful voice!” added Popster. “Catherine, will you play some more?”

Antoinette sang and she was definitely looking a bit more cheerful. When they had finished that song Antoinette suggested another. And then another.

Madame Court Manteau could hear music coming from the morning room. She was impressed and went in to check if it was Kick playing the piano. Antoinette, looking happier, was teaching Popster a verse from one of the songs.

“Catherine!” she cried, “you play so well!”

“Madame,” she replied modestly, “I have not practised enough.”

“Nonsense! You impress me with your ability!”

“Madame,” said Popster, “Miss Antoinette has a wonderful voice. We have rarely heard such beautiful singing!”

“There, Antoinette. What have we been telling you? Now you have heard it from two who are able to judge!”

After her mother had left the room, Antoinette took the twins hands in hers. “Catherine, Patrice, I am very sorry, I should not have been so rude to you earlier.”

“We understand Miss Antoinette,” said Popster.

“And please, call me Antoinette. I want you to be my friends not my servants.” She continued, “will you help me? I want to practise these three songs until they are perfect. Then we can perform them for Princess Augustine and Prince Louis if they should come to our Empire Day musical evening. The second song can be for an encore and the third in case they want even more. Modesty dictates that then we should stop.”

During this discussion, a telephone rang in the corner of the room. 'At least they have telephones!' thought Kick as she looked at the primitive device.

Antoinette answered. They couldn't understand much of the conversation but they soon saw a rapid change in her mood.

"Prince Louis has apologised for yesterday!" she enthused, "he has accepted the invitation to our musical evening at the end of the month. He will bring Princess Augustine. Oh, and they will want to meet you both."

"Right," said Kick. "We've got enough time to fully rehearse these songs then we can give an impressive performance. The second song can be sung as a duet. Are you happy to do that, Patrice?"

"Of course," replied Popster.

That night, in their attic room, the twins told Meldy about their conversation with Madame.

"Oh I really like Sophie," she replied. "She did mention her brother but then we heard Antoinette singing...."

"That was us," said Kick, "we managed to persuade her."

"Sophie was pleased," said Meldy as she stifled some yawns.

Later, while Meldy slept, the twins whispered to each other.

"I think we did well today, don't you?" said Kick. "I like Antoinette although I was a bit worried at first."

"I was wondering whether she'd be another Evil lena," said Popster, "but Madame's intervention did the trick. Your playing certainly saved the day and didn't she sing well?"

"She certainly did and your trick with the French lyrics worked a treat."

"If the Odious Bourgs taught us anything, it was to be devious. By the way, you played really well today!"

"I don't know what happened. It's like my fingers had brains of their own! I know I'm not that good."

“Well you are now so maybe that lightning strike gave you superpowers!”

To be continued