

Chapter 14 Lady Pastena Pays Another Visit

The head of school at St Hildegard's was in her office when Lady Pastena marched in. "What has happened to Esmerelda Wagley?" she demanded.

"Good morning, Lady Pastena. She was excluded from school for insubordination. We cannot allow ..."

"She must be re-instated at once!"

"But insubordination, Lady Pastena, you saw it...."

"We were mistaken. What is the world coming to if fine students like Lady Esmerelda are not allowed to come to school?"

"Lady Esmerelda, Lady Pastena? Surely you don't believe"

"Certain confidential information has been passed to me that confirms many of her claims. Within St Hildegard's she will now be known as Lady Esmerelda Wagley."

"Have you thought about the implications of this, Lady Pastena?"

"Have you thought about the effect this could have on future student recruitment? If you haven't, I'm quite sure the head of St Ursula's will be only too pleased ..."

"Please, Lady Pastena, let's not be too hasty. Before we can allow her back certain approaches need to be made to the students. They must be made aware"

"Exactly. I will talk to the whole school at assembly tomorrow."

"Thank you Lady Pastena. I'm sure that will be for the best."

On the following morning the assembled students were surprised to see Lady Pastena sitting with the staff on the stage.

"What's she doing here?" some whispered.

"We usually get some warning when she's around," said others.

Towards the end of the assembly, before the students fanned out to their classrooms or laboratories, Lady Pastena rose to her feet.

"Students of St Hildegard's, it has been said that women hold up half the sky. I have always felt the ethos of our school, a school which I attended some years ago now, was to encourage its students to strive for even more. How can we achieve this? It could

involve courage, self-sacrifice, dedication, even bravery. You will be faced, in your lives, with situations where you have to make difficult decisions. On some occasions you will know what is right and your choice will be easy, on other occasions it will be difficult.”

She continued, “One of our students faced just such a choice. I am referring to Lady Esmerelda Wagley, who will be back with you next week. I have received confidential information that confirms her claim, initially considered incredible, is, in fact, true.”

She took a sip of water, then said, “For those of you who did not hear the story, she took part in a daring rescue of a Princess, code named Augustine, to protect her true identity. This Princess was being held captive but Lady Esmerelda, with three friends of similar age, negotiated a secret passageway and released her. The family in question do not seek publicity and the police investigation is still ongoing, so nothing further can be said about locations or true identities.”

Here Lady Pastena paused while the assembled students whispered to each other. Once this had subsided, she carried on. “As a reward for their courage, the four rescuers were given medals and titles. Within the school it has been decided that we will refer to our brave student as Lady Esmerelda. She may prefer Lady Meldy or just Meldy. We shall see. This student is an exemplary example of the ethos of our school so I expect her to be welcomed back. Anyone who attempts to make her life difficult will answer directly to me.”

The students shuffled out of the hall. Meldy’s classmates were very surprised and some even felt guilty they had laughed at her when, in fact, she had been telling the truth.

“Meldy did mention the Departement de Londres,” said one. “Was that code as well?”

“It must have been,” said another.

When Meldy arrived at school next week a group of younger students were there to meet her.

“Good morning, Lady Esmerelda, can we carry your bag?”

“Good morning,” said Meldy, “what’s your name?”

Rather shyly, the students curtsied as they gave their names. Soon more students appeared so these had to be introduced to Meldy as well. They followed her to her form room and one politely asked where she would be at mid morning break. She was sure some of her friends would really like to be introduced to Lady Esmerelda.

Meldy's friends apologised for their behaviour and of course Meldy forgave them. It is very important to be gracious when one is a Lady. She even spoke to those who had made fun of her and her medal. Some were still a bit sceptical but the fear of incurring the wrath of Lady Pastena kept them quiet.

A few days later a prospective new parent was touring the school.

"We hear good things about St Hildegard's of course but St Ursula's does look very attractive."

"Of course," replied the head, "St Ursula's is an excellent school. If your daughter came here she would, of course, be in the same class as Lady Esmerelda...."

"Lady Esmerelda? That would be very appealing. She must make up her own mind of course."

"Of course. We value independence very highly here at St Hildegard's"

The twins watched Meldy's progress with interest and were surprised at the flutter of excitement amongst the younger students every time she appeared. This lasted for weeks and little groups of them followed Meldy around the school.

Some of their friends had asked them about their role in Meldy's rescue mission.

"What were you doing when your little sister was out saving Princesses?" one asked.

"Learning the piano and studying," said Kick.

"Singing and studying," said Popster.

Their friend Misia knew the truth but she was saying nothing.

Parsley Plinkoff was sitting under that certain tree in the woods behind Wood Tofton. He had sat there every morning for over a week but he was determined to go back to the Departement de Londres.

'I wonder if I got it wrong?' he thought. 'I don't think so because Alain Court Manteau said that's the best time to charge up the Capacitors on the Professor's machine.'

An agitated squirrel was flicking its tail in a neighbouring tree. It flicked and flicked but he ignored it. It flicked again and he disappeared.

It stopped flicking and continued looking for nuts.

Lady Esmerelda Wagley had enjoyed being back at school. Most of her classmates seemed to accept her elevated status although one or two could be seen scowling behind her back. One girl tried to wind her up by calling her prized medal, the one that had been given to her by Napoleon the Tenth, a worthless fake. Lady Pastena Drinktyre used a timely intervention to put a stop to that.

“Been running to Lady Putrid have you?” The girl taunted Meldy afterwards.

“No,” she replied. “Why should I? Anyway, she’s called Lady Pastena.”

Things settled down for the rest of that week. On Saturday morning she yawned and stretched as she awoke. Should she rise or stay where she was? She was a Lady after all and Ladies had certain privileges. A head appeared round her door.

“Can I have breakfast in bed?” she asked.

“Meldy, we’ve been through this a hundred times. One, I am not your servant and two, you only get breakfast in bed when you’re sick. And you are not sick.”

“But mummy I think I might be.”

Mrs Wagley entered and placed an experienced palm on her youngest daughter’s forehead.

“No, everything feels quite normal to me.”

“But....”

“Come on Meldy, time to get up. You can’t stay in there all day.”

“Oh alright,” she sighed. Another head appeared, it was Popster’s.

“Mum, are we going to town today? Meldy, you’re not faking it again, are you?”

“I don’t need to fake it Popster. I’m sick more often now, it’s the food. It’s not as good here as it was in the Departement de Londres.”

“Well, get used to it because we’re not going back through the gateway anytime soon.”

“Why is parallel world food better than real world food?” asked Mrs Wagley.

“I don’t know but it just is,” replied Popster.

Kick appeared and asked, “What is?”

“The food. It tasted better in the Departement de Londres.”

“You’re right. I don’t know why but it just did.”

“Well, if you all got jobs,” said Mrs Wagley, “maybe we could afford a cook!”

“Oh, I nearly forgot,” said Kick. “Meldy, Nicky wants to see you. I said you’d be there in half an hour.”

“I’d better hurry then. I forgot I was going round there today.”

After a brief spell at the breakfast table, Meldy raced round to the neighbour’s and climbed up the ladder to meet Nicky in his tree house.

“Meldy, what’s the name of that lady at your school?”

“What lady? There’s lots of them. Was it a dinner lady?”

“No. It’s the lady you made fun of. The one that came to see you when she realised you’d been telling the truth. You know, about going to the Department of London.”

“It’s the Departement de Londres. Do you mean Lady Pastena? She came this week and told off this girl for calling my medal a fake.”

“But anyone can see it isn’t. It’s wonderful, you’re so lucky to have it.”

“Yes, I suppose I am but if you’d been there instead of me you’d have rescued the Princess too.”

Nicky thought he would have but he’d never been in a secret passage full of spiders.

“Anyway,” he said, “Lady Pastena’s in trouble, or her husband is. My mum said he’s been accused of trading inside.”

“Trading inside? Like in a shop when it’s raining?”

“I suppose so. He could go to prison.”

“For trading inside a shop? That’s not fair!”

“Well if he’s in prison, what’s she going to do?”

“Maybe she should start trading outside or something. I don’t know but my parents will.” Later, she went home and asked her mother.

“Mummy, what’s trading inside?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Lady Pastena’s husband is going to prison for doing it.”

“Don’t you mean insider trading?”

“I don’t know.”

“Insider trading is definitely a crime. It’s when a director sells company shares and makes a profit by using confidential company information.”

“Oh but if you know it, it isn’t confidential is it?”

“It could be. It must be publicised first so everyone else has a chance to profit as well.”

“Do you think he did it?”

“We mustn’t jump to conclusions Meldy. There will be a trial and he could well be proved innocent.”