

## Chapter 15 Meldy hears bad news

Many others were not as fair minded as Mrs Wagley. Once the charge became public knowledge Lady Pastena was asked, very politely of course, to keep her distance from Meldy's school. Some of the parents had complained to the head even though there was no suggestion she was personally involved in the alleged crime. The merest whiff of scandal was enough to smear the family's hitherto unblemished name.

There was also a lot of media interest. Back in Wood Tofton, Meldy sat and watched a report on the local news which showed a throng of expectant reporters crowding round an impressive looking gate.

"I didn't realise they live at Nether Tofton Manor," remarked Mr Wagley.

"Why are there so many of them?" asked Meldy. "It's not fair. She's innocent. Why are they picking on her?"

"That's the way the press works," sighed her father, "they're hoping she'll appear so they can bombard her with questions. They try and trick you into saying things you'll regret later. If you don't they'll probably make it up."

"But what about the environment? Why aren't they writing about woods and wetlands and... and.... things like that?"

"The public loves a scandal Meldy."

"Well they shouldn't. It's not right!"

"I suppose he might be guilty," said Kick, "he could even lose his title."

"And she," added Popster, "would then lose her's as well."

Meldy was thinking. She knew where Nether Tofton was and an idea was taking root in her mind. She'd go over there and shout at those reporters. What right had they got to crowd round her gate like that? She'd show them! There was a chance the very next day. She went to see Nicky and asked to borrow his bike.

"What do you want it for?"

"I'm going to Lady Pastena's."

"Can I come too?"

"But if I've got your bike you can't."

“I’ll take my brother’s.”

“Won’t it be too big?”

“I can ride it. I’ve done it before.”

“Yes, you can come. You can shout at them too but we mustn’t tell anyone.”

They snuck the bikes out of the shed and managed to get into Woodhayes Lane unseen. They pedalled off towards the centre of Wood Tofton and took the road to Nether Tofton.

“Where’s her house?” asked Nicky.

“I don’t know but there are loads of reporters outside. We can’t miss it.”

As soon as they arrived, Meldy led the charge. Ringing her bell, she raced through the crowd to the gate. She jumped off and confronted them.

“Go away!” she shouted.

“You heard her,” added Nicky, “she’s Lady Esmerelda. You’ve got to do as she says!”

“Why?” asked a reporter.

“Because.... Because...”

“Because Lady Pastena didn’t do anything wrong,” cried Meldy, “and it’s not fair to bother her like this. Her husband’s innocent, you’ll see! Leave her alone you er, you stinkers!”

“How do you know he’s innocent?” asked another reporter. “You don’t work for him do you?” Here there was a ripple of laughter from the others.

“Lady Pastena helps out at my school. She gives us money to buy things we couldn’t afford without it. Now she doesn’t come with the money anymore. You’re hurting our school! If I fail my exams because of it then I can’t become a scientist and it’ll all be your fault.”

“And she’ll have to do a rubbish job like a reporter!” laughed Nicky.

“We’ve heard Lady Pastena can be fierce,” said a reporter ignoring Nicky’s insult.

“Well she has to be doesn’t she, we do more work when we know she’s coming.”

“So you won’t work as hard now she’s not coming?”

“We’ll work even harder because we want her to come back!”

Inside the Manor, Lady Pastena had been watching all this on a CCTV monitor. She was pleased that Meldy and her friend had come to stand up for her. Meldy and Nicky, still outside, were surprised when the gate behind them swung open and someone invited them in. Leaving their bikes on the doorstep, they were taken to see the Lady of the house.

“Lady Esmerelda, what a pleasant surprise.”

“Lady Pastena, may I present my friend Nicky? He lent me his bike so I could come.”

“Hello Nicky. Don’t you have your own bike Esmerelda?”

“Yes I do but my parents would have stopped me coming.”

“So they don’t know you’re here?”

“No, they wouldn’t have wanted me to come but I wanted to anyway.”

“Esmerelda, I must tell them. They’ll be worried about you.”

“I suppose so. We don’t believe all those stories Lady Pastena. You’re innocent and so is your husband.”

“Thank you Esmerelda. Yes, he is innocent but it might be difficult to prove.”

“Why?”

“The one person who could provide crucial evidence has gone missing. No one has seen or heard anything from him.”

“But you must find him Lady Pastena.”

“Of course, but how? Parsley Plinkoff...”

“He’s the man that stole my medal and thought we were all aliens!”

“I was surprised when I heard what he’d done. Totally out of character.”

“He’d been to the Departement de Londres. I forgave him.”

“In the parallel world. Yes. He told me all about that. At first I didn’t believe him but Sir Desward said he wouldn’t make it up. He’s the one who can vouch for Sir Desward’s innocence.”

“But he did go there, Lady Pastena. He said things no one else could possibly have known. He must have gone.”

“Esmerelda, do you think he could have gone back there? He spoke in glowing terms of the place.”

“He could have done, he knew how to do it.”

“Well if he is there Sir Desward will end up in prison. No one else can save him.”

“I’ll go and get him Lady Pastena. Then we’ll show them!”

“Esmerelda, you must not do that although thank you so much for offering.”

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When Meldy and Nicky had cycled over to Nether Tofton Manor, some reporters outside the gate took pictures and one of these appeared in the morning paper entitled, ‘Sir Desward’s Hatchet Kids.’ Kick and Popster had been sent over to escort these same kids back home. On approaching the crowd of reporters Kick whispered, “Don’t stand too close. You know what’ll happen if you do.”

Popster understood straight away. A photograph would appear in the paper with a suitably witty caption. Kick pushed her way through to the gate and rang the bell while Popster hung back. Once the assembled reporters realised they were identical the comments poured forth.

“Here comes double trouble.”

“Sir Desward’s doubling down on his crime.” Kick turned round to face the offending reporter.

“Last time I looked, we lived in England where guilt has to be established in a court of law not by the rabble!”

“So you think we’re a rabble do you?” asked one.

“Let it go,” said another, “why don’t you two stand together over here so we can get a nice picture for our readers?”

“I don’t think so,” replied Kick, “you can take our picture with Lady Pastena when Sir Desward’s innocence has been established.”

“And,” added Popster, “you can be be sure it will.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” said someone.

“Why don’t you hold yours,” shot back Kick, “preferably for at least an hour!”

The gate behind them swung open so they went into the house. Lady Pastena was grateful for their supportive comments but warned them about Meldy’s plan.

“Keep an eye on her. She might try to return to the Departement de Londres. She wants to find the man who can help my husband clear his name.”

“We will, Lady Pastena,” said Kick while Popster reflected on how difficult that might prove to be.