

## Chapter 16. Meldy is sent home (again!)

At school the twins were applying themselves to their studies but Meldy was finding things increasingly difficult. Some of the girls in her class had started to exploit Lady Pastena's extended absence by resorting to some catch-up taunting.

"We always knew you were lying!"

"Lady Putrid Dungheap can't help you now, can she. Why don't you throw that fake medal away?"

At first Meldy ignored them or just gave a polite 'lady like' response but this annoyed them even more. One day, after suffering more taunts of 'fake medal Meldy' she turned, gave them a suitably haughty look and replied,

"I don't know, St Hildegard's is going to the dogs. They're really scraping the barrel and letting in the dregs of the dregs these days."

"Are you calling me a dreg?" asked Prissy.

"No, I called you the dregs of the dregs because that's what you are!"

The resulting fight had to be broken up by a teacher. Meldy found herself back in the head teacher's study.

"Esmerelda Wagley, you are a troublemaker. You are always being sent to my office. Now I hear you've been in a fight and Priscilla says you called her a dreg."

"Well Miss, she behaved like one so I was only telling the truth. Anyway, she hit me first!"

"Esmerelda, I am aware some of the girls have been teasing you but that is no excuse for fighting. Disgraceful behaviour! In my day, they used to say, 'sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me,' perhaps you should remember that."

"Well Miss, they do hurt me, and they're hurting Lady Pastena as well. She has to stay inside her house because it's surrounding by nasty rude reporters who are lying about her and her husband. Am I supposed to stay in my house because Missy Dreggy Prissy is lying about me? Am I supposed to let her hit me as well?"

"Esmerelda, Lady Pastena chose to intervene on your behalf. She told us about your exploits in France and we accepted what she said. Well, in the light of current events we are questioning her intentions. We suspect she might have had an ulterior motive...."

“No she didn’t Miss! Where else do you think I got my medal? It was awarded to me for my bravery! My friends all got them too! You think Lady Pastena’s guilty. Well she’s not, you’ll see! She’s decent and honest and she gives a lot to our school!”

The head was taken aback by Meldy’s outburst. “Esmerelda! Apologise at once! If you do not this will no longer be your school.”

“It’s not fair Miss! So why should I?”

After this outburst Mrs Wagley was sent for yet again. She had to leave an online meeting in order to collect Meldy but it was boring anyway so she was pleased to have an excuse to sign off. As Meldy left the school building there was Prissy with a look of triumph on her face.

Meldy found herself back in her room. She was in tears. “Mummy, I can’t go back there. I hate them! Prissy insulted me and she hit me and they said it’s my fault. It’s not fair!”

“I know dear. A fresh start will do you good so we’ll look around for another school.”

They took her to St Ursula’s but it would not do. She didn’t like the uniform or the students she had met, she just wanted to go back to the way things were at St Hildegard’s. That meant putting up with a few nasty comments and looking forward to Lady Pastena’s occasional visits. But, she wanted them to ask her to go back. Well actually, she wanted them to beg her but a polite request would do. She’d give Missy Prissy fake medal!

“I think,” said Mrs Wagley later that day, “Lady Pastena’s blameless and I’m proud of you for standing up for her.”

“Thank you Mummy, we’re right. They’ll see.”

“Actually, I think there’s someone out there trying to undermine Sir Desward.”

“Why would they do that?”

“They might want to take over his company. If he loses his reputation, they could buy it more cheaply.”

“But that’s wrong!”

“You’re right dear, but not everyone is honest like us.”

“Thank you Mummy. I’m happy to be up here on my own, you’ve got lots of work to do haven’t you?” After her mother had left, Meldy jumped up and grabbed her diary.

‘Good thing I write everything down,’ she said to herself as she turned the pages. She was looking for some dates. Dates when she had gone to and returned from the Departement de Londres. Dates when Antoinette, Sophie and Stephanie had arrived and departed. She knew the times but it was the days of the week that interested her. She had a plan and she was going to take Nicky with her. She was going back to the Departement de Londres.

That evening she was in Nicky’s tree house. “Have you been sent home from school again?” he asked.

“Yes. They don’t believe I rescued the Princess. You believe me, don’t you?”

“Yes ‘cos you don’t lie. I know you did everything you said you did.”

“Thanks,” she replied. After a brief pause she blurted out, “I’m going to the Departement de Londres and you can come too if you like!”

“You bet I’ll come. That’ll be brilliant!”

“We have to be in the woods early in the morning on Wednesdays and Saturdays until they do their experiment. Then the gateway’ll open and we’ll go through to the Place de Napoleon.”

“You mean the university physics people can open it?”

“Yes, with their Matter Transportation machine. I’ve got my Identity Card so we’ll go to the police station as soon as we get there. I know the Police chief lady so we’ll get you one. We can stay with Sophie, she’s got lot’s of room.”

Early on Wednesday morning Meldy crept out of the house and squeezed through the hedge to collect Nicky. They walked up Woodhayes lane and took the track into the woods which led to the special tree where the gateway was known to exist.

“We have to sit and wait,” said Meldy. They waited and waited, then waited some more. They fell asleep but when they awoke they were still there.

“Oh well, they didn’t do their experiment today I suppose,” sighed Meldy as they walked back home to their respective houses. She crept in unobserved and negotiated the stairs before anyone else came down. She dived into her room just as the bathroom door opened but managed to ease her door shut without being seen.

Nicky's enthusiasm for the proposed adventure was undiminished so they retraced their route on Saturday morning. They sat under the tree in the wood but soon fell asleep. Later, Meldy woke with a start and she couldn't smell the woods anymore. The fragrant aroma of woodland flowers and green vegetation had been replaced by a faint smell of horse manure. She knew immediately where she was, she was back in the Departement de Londres. She jumped up and shook Nicky.

"Wake up, we're here!"

Nicky opened his eyes, yawned and staggered to his feet.

"Er, what, er, are we really? That's so brilliant!"

"There's Napoleon's statue and we have to go over to that post and wave."

"Why are we waving at a post?"

"There's a camera on top. The police will see us and we'll get a ride to the police station."

Nicky looked around at the trees and the houses in the square. He had been to London with his family and he'd seen squares just like this.

"Are you sure we're in the parallel world? I think we're in London."

"But you didn't see a statue of Napoleon there, did you?"

"No. Are you sure that's him?"

"It says so underneath and I looked him up at home. Anyway, can't you hear all the horses?"

"Oh yes, now I can. Let's go and wave at that camera."

While they waved, the camera on the pole swivelled round to get a better look. They stood and waited.

"They'll come from over there," said Meldy as she strode over to the fence at the edge of the square.

They stood for a few minutes before Nicky asked, "Who's that?" then he cried "Look out!"

"Grab them!" shouted a woman. "I will get the girl, you get the boy!"

Meldy spun round just in time to see a tall thin woman lunging at her. She turned to run but it was too late, she was caught but still managed to kick out. The woman didn't even flinch.

"So, Esmeralda Wagley. We meet at last!"

"Let me go! Let me go!" she cried.

Nicky, seeing his friend was in trouble, ran at the woman and pummelled her with his fists.

"Leave her alone!" he cried. He was grabbed from behind but he too kicked out at his assailant.

"Ow!" was the response, "I thought you said they were harmless!"

"Quick," hissed the woman, "stop whining, the police will soon be here! We can hide in the bushes over there."

The two friends were gagged then dragged away from the statue to the far corner of the square. Once inside the bushes they were tightly gripped so that movement, let alone escape, was impossible. A few minutes passed then they heard the clatter of hooves and the rumble of an approaching wagon. The police had arrived.

"Be quiet!" hissed the woman, "or we will use chloroform!"

Meldy knew what that was so decided to obey. Two police officers were now approaching the statue, maybe they would come over to the bushes. Meldy watched as they scanned the surrounding area then one squatted down and examined the grass.

"Someone has been here recently," she said. "Look at these markings."

"You are right," said the other.

"Probably another abduction," said the policewoman. "There are signs of footsteps here, and here. They lead over there."

The two officers started to walk across the grass towards the bushes. Meldy could smell the chloroform on a rag that was being held close in case it was needed. The two officers came even nearer then stopped. The trail had obviously gone cold.

"We must report back," said the male officer. They turned to go. Meldy heard sighs of relief from her captors. There would be no rescue from the police yet.

Ten minutes later another wagon appeared and they were bundled inside. The woman joined them in the back while the man sat up front with the driver. “Do not try anything!” she hissed as they lurched and bumped their way out of the square.

“What do you want with us?” asked Meldy while she stared back at the woman. Black hair with a silver streak on one side plus a hooked nose. Just like an evil witch.

“You have interfered with our plans once too often. We will make sure you do not do it again!”

“What plans? Nicky didn’t do anything!”

“He is your friend. That is enough. Anyway, you know very well what plans.”

“If I knew I wouldn’t ask.”

“Think child. What did you do that caused them, those that are deluded, to call you a hero?”

“Oh. You mean rescuing Princess Augustine?”

“Exactly. Now she is to be made Empress and.....”

“But that’s wonderful! She’ll be brilliant!”

“Stop this nonsense! No, she will not be brilliant!”

“Yes she will and I know ‘cos I’m a hero and I’ve got the medal to prove it!”

“No! You are not a hero!”

“Why not? I am too! Everyone says so!”

“No they do not!”

“Yes they do!” cried Nicky.

“Enough of this, I should be Empress! My family has always been much more illustrious than hers!”

“You?” replied an incredulous Meldy, “I don’t know who you are and I wouldn’t have heard of you if I did!”

“Silence you insolent deluded girl! Do you not know the story of the du Malcontent family?”

“The what Mudcomplete family?” With this Meldy and Nicky burst out laughing.

“Enough of this! Anyway you will not save her this time. I will take my rightful place as head of state and the crowds will acclaim me, yes Myrtille du Malcontent, as their rightful leader, their Empress.” She had this far away gleam in her eye at this point which made the children rather nervous.

She turned to the front. This gave Meldy the chance to glance at Nicky. She made a circular gesture with a finger which said what they were both thinking. ‘She’s away with the fairies!’