

Chapter 17. The search begins

In the woods above Wood Tofton a woman stretched and rose to her feet. Everything looked familiar. Knowing the way to the Wagley's house, she set off down the hill. She was looking forward to seeing her English friends again.

Mrs Wagley was soon knocking on Meldy's door. She knocked. And then she knocked some more.

"Wake up Meldy! Amelie has come to visit!"

No answer.

She put her head inside the room. No Meldy. She wasn't in the bathroom either. Back down stairs, she asked whether the twins had seen her.

"She's probably out talking to the squirrels," said Kick.

"Or she could be next door with Nicky," added Popster.

Meanwhile, Amelie was having a well earned breakfast with Mr Wagley.

"So there's to be a coronation?" he asked.

"Yes, and Princess Augustine instructed me to deliver the invitations to your daughters."

"Well, I don't know..."

"As recipients of the Order of Napoleon the Second they will occupy the place of honour. Of course, without them there might not have been a Coronation."

"Yes, I see, but..."

"Princess Augustine will be our first female Emperor. It will be an important day for our country."

"What about her father?"

"He is abdicating in her favour. He has realised her popularity will help unite the country but will offer advice if it is needed."

Mrs Wagley appeared in the doorway with the twins.

“Nicky’s mother was just here. It looks like he’s missing as well and they’re not in his tree house.”

“Kick and Popster,” said Mr Wagley, “check the garden.”

“We already have,” said Popster.

“I hate to say this,” mused Kick, “I think they’ve gone to the Departement de Londres.”

“Are you sure?” asked their mother.

“Well, she did want to help Lady Pastena clear her husband’s name.”

“Why didn’t you warn us about this?” asked Mr Wagley.

“We did tell you,” said Popster, “but you probably didn’t take it seriously. We certainly didn’t!”

“But you know what she’s like,” replied their mother, “and when she gets together with Nicky there’s no telling what they’ll get up to!”

“Maybe,” said Amelie, “I should let you...”

“That’s alright Amelie,” said Mr Wagley. “Please stay. You haven’t finished your breakfast. Well Kick and Popster, I suppose you’ll have to go to the Coronation after all. They can come back with you.”

“You didn’t plan this did you?” asked their mother.

“How could we have done?” asked Kick.

“Well it looks like Meldy and Nicky managed it so I suppose you could have helped them.”

“I don’t think our twins had anything to do with it,” said their father. “Like you said my dear. There’s no telling what Nicky and Meldy will get up to when they’re together!”

It was early morning in the Place de Napoleon. Some recently departed workers from the Bureau de Sanitaire had cleaned the area and now the square was silent. A short time later a blue grey police wagon drove into this same square and its two

horses were reined in by the small gate near the statue of Napoleon. Two police officers climbed out followed by Alain Court Manteau.

“They will arrive in a few minutes,” he said as he looked around. No sign of life, no one watching the square, the only sound some cooing doves on one of the nearby houses.

“The kidnappers might have seen us arrive,” replied a policeman. “They could even have a safe house in this square, we simply do not know.”

“They are here!” cried Alain as he ran over to the three travellers from the parallel world.

Amelie was first on her feet. “Monsieur Alain!” she cried as she brushed herself down. “Catherine and Patrice! We are here!”

Popster was first to respond. She had already noticed the police officers and soon became aware of the expression of concern on Alain’s face.

“Alain,” she asked, “what’s wrong?”

“Patrice, it is Esmeralda and her friend. We think they have been kidnapped.”

“I don’t understand. Who would want to kidnap them?”

“We do not know. The police came to get them but they were not here. Sophie is safe but Raoul and Paul have also disappeared.”

“They all rescued Princess Augustine,” added Kick as she became aware of the conversation. “There must be some connection.”

“That is why the police are here. We think you could be targeted as well.”

“Why us?”

“All six of you were honoured by the Emperor for saving his daughter and providing the intelligence that ensured his successful release. We thought the revolutionaries were either in exile or in prison but some of them could still be at large.”

“Do you think they’re planning to disrupt the Coronation?” asked Kick.

“Very likely. You were to be honoured guests. Perhaps the sight of you all sitting there would be too much for them.”

“Making them look inept,” mused Popster, “defeated by a group of children you mean?”

“Yes, but what special children! Anyway, let us leave before we attract unwanted attention.”

One of the police officers came over. “Look at this,” she said, “it was in the bushes over there. They could have missed it in the previous search.”

Alain held it up to have a closer look. It was a silver bracelet of elaborate design but with a defective clasp.

“There is a crest here. Ah. It is the crest of the du Malcontent family so it could belong to Myrtille. She was a favourite of the Empress but was dismissed by the Emperor.”

“It was said that the Princess wished it,” added the policewoman.

“She can’t have been very nice,” said Kick, “Princess Augustine wouldn’t have got rid of a trusted lady in waiting.”

“True. Many stories appeared in the papers concerning the royal family and she was blamed.”

“Did the leaks stop after she left?” asked Popster.

“Apparently they did.”

“Well she must have been guilty!”

“Of course but people like that do not see themselves as guilty. They see themselves as entitled to behave in any way they see fit. Officer, I think we have identified our kidnappers. This is intended to be her revenge on the royal family.”

“We will report to Commissioner Duplessis as soon as we return,” she replied, “they could be planning to disrupt coronation day. Our files might give us some information on her accomplices.”

They climbed into the police wagon which then completed its circuit of the square before heading for the Court Manteau residence. Some way behind, another wagon was following and its two occupants had noted the arrival of the twins.

“We must tell Madame du Malcontent,” said one.

“Well we have three of them and we will get those twins. You can be sure of that.”

“She wants us to get the Court Manteau girl as well. You heard what she said.”

“She is obsessive. That could be dangerous. Obsessive people make mistakes.”

They watched as the police wagon disappeared into the entrance passageway that led to the rear of the Court Manteau’s house. Inside the wagon, the clatter of hooves in the confined space told the twins they were back in what had become a home from home for them. So many pleasant memories but now they were partially negated by worries about their sister and their neighbour Nicky.

When the carriage pulled up outside the rear entrance to the house a police guard came to meet them. Sophie Court Manteau, Meldy’s best friend, was with him.

“We have intelligence that suggests an attempt will be made to kidnap Lady Sophie and they could go after Ladies Catherine and Patrice as well. Commissioner Duplessis thinks they should all stay at the palace because it is so well guarded. We need all the officers we can muster to search for the other children.”

“I agree,” replied Alain, “they will be safer there. Sophie can sit here with us.” With that the wagon went back through the entrance passageway and headed towards the Grand Boulevard. This would take them south towards the River Couronne and the palace.

Some distance away, the occupants of the other wagon had been watching.

“Should we follow them?” asked one, “they are not going back to the police station.”

“You are right. What are they up to?”

The police wagon reached the boulevard and turned south.

“They are going to the palace. Will they be staying there?”

Inside the police wagon, Amelie was comforting Sophie. “Do not worry Miss Sophie, the police will find your friends.”

“But they might be in danger and I cannot help them. I want to go out and look!”

“Amelie is right Sophie,” said Popster, “we are worried as well but there is not much we can do at the moment. We must not expose you to danger as well.”

“Sophie,” said Kick, “we know Meldy and Nicky. They’ll be planning to escape. You can be sure of that. She’s brave just like you. Very brave. And Nicky is too. The kidnappers won’t dare harm them or they’ll be locked up for ever and the key will be thrown away!”

“But I want to help them!”

“We know you do Sophie,” replied Popster. “Meldy is so lucky to have a loyal friend like you.”

“Princess Augustine will know what to do,” added Amelie, “The Emperor has complete faith in her, so does everyone else.”

“Except this Mytille du Malcontent woman,” said Kick, “she sounds like a nasty piece of work.”

“I agree with you, I don’t think she will harm her prisoners,” replied Amelie, “I think she just wants them out of the way for a while.”

By now they had reached the palace. The police were very much in evidence and the occupants were checked over before being allowed through the gates.

The second wagon had kept a discreet distance. One of the occupants produced a pair of binoculars.

“We should be able to see who gets out,” he said as he focussed on the rear of the distant police wagon.

“Who is in there?” asked his companion.

“You were right. Those twins are there with the maid and there is someone else. It is Sophie Court Manteau.”

“Myrtille will not be happy. We cannot kidnap them while they are in there.”

“But it will not interfere with our plans. We still have some of their heroes. That will have to do.”

“For us, yes. But will she be satisfied?”

“Well, those twins will not stay in there for ever. Surely they will want to look for their sister?”

“If they come out we can grab them. Let us tell her what we have seen.”

Once inside the palace, the guests were shown to their rooms. After they had settled in, they were invited to have breakfast with the Princess.

“Welcome back to the Departement de Londres Catherine and Patrice,” she said.
“We are very pleased that you will be at the Coronation.”

“Thank you your highness. Of course we are very worried about Meldy and our neighbour Nicky.”

“Of course, I understand. Surely it can only be a matter of time until they are located?”

“Alain identified Madame du Malcontent as a possible suspect.”

“So I have been informed. I think she has a grudge against me because I did not trust her. I could never understand why my mother did. In our position, you must have complete confidence in people who are in close proximity to you.”

“Of course your Highness,” said Popster.

“Good,” said the Princess, “here is Antoinette. She will be staying here as well.”

“Commissioner Duplessis,” said Antoinette after she had greeted the twins, “has taken personal charge of the search for Meldy and her friends. When I met her last I could see how affected she was by their disappearance.”

“I think she has a soft spot for our little sister,” said Popster.

“Yes,” added Princess Augustine, “I think we all do.”