

Chapter 21. The Coronation

On the eve of the Coronation, Commissioner Duplessis briefed her security team. After outlining the problems that could be caused by Madame du Malcontent, she told them about a certain visitor to the City of Londres.

“Be certain to check identity cards but there is one unusual one which you might come across. This man is an important visitor to our country and knows Madame du Malcontent personally. His investigations must be assisted not impeded.”

“Madame Commissioner, how will we know who he is?”

“His identity card is very distinctive, a red border with the important details highlighted in gold. There is nothing else like it. Any more questions? Good. You will take up your positions at six o'clock tomorrow. Be vigilant.”

The next day dawned with a spectacular sunrise. Some early scattered cloud gave way to bright sunlight as the carriages were lined up and participants in the procession took their places.

The recipients of the country's most prestigious medals were to be in front so this meant Meldy and her friends sat in the lead carriage followed by the twins and Antoinette. Princess Augustine personally approved the inclusion of Nicky in the lead carriage with his friends.

The Grand Boulevard was lined with wagons from the Bureau de Sanitaire and the operatives stood smartly by with their shouldered polished shovels. Baron von Kühlshrank walked along behind this line of wagons and had expected to watch the procession through the gaps. On two occasions his identity was checked by police patrols but he continued unimpeded. He knew something was going to happen. He had to find Myrtille du Malcontent before the royal carriage arrived.

‘She is here, I can sense it!’ he thought.

He peered through a gap in the line of operatives and could see Meldy's carriage approaching. She was waving but scanning the onlookers at the same time. Would she see Myrtille and what would she do if she did? He knew Princess Augustine and the current Emperor were in a carriage some way behind the lead vehicles. They would be the target of any attack. They had been warned of the danger but were determined to proceed with the event.

He looked at the men and women lined up with their vehicles but no one looked familiar. The wagons were neatly grouped by depots with their bird identification labels prominently displayed. Here were some swan wagons, six of them, neatly presented with ribbons tied on all four corners. Next came some flamingo wagons.

He carried on, then stopped. His eye for detail had picked up an anomaly. One of the wagons was in an odd position and its flamingo label varied ever so slightly from the others. There was something different in the way its elevated leg was drawn.

“It’s Parsley Pierre! Hello Parsley Pierre!” Meldy had called out to someone behind him on the line. He turned and saw some people he recognised. How had he missed them? It was the couple he had spoken to a few days ago.

He looked back at the flamingo wagon. There was a tall woman standing beside it with blond hair but the hair didn’t fit somehow. ‘It is a wig,’ he thought. Then she twisted her ring. ‘It is her!’

He goes back to the man Meldy had recognised. “Please, come with me!” he whispers. Without a word Pierre, Claudette and some of their owl depot team follow him back to the flamingo wagon. Myrtille hears something and turns.

“Myrtille du Malcontent!” says the Baron, “we meet again!”

She scowls as she darts at the wagon. Now she has a knife in her hand. Baron Bruno backs off but draws her attention from the others who manage to get behind her. A well aimed shovel hits her on the hand holding the knife and Claudette jumps on her back, gripping her neck in an arm lock. Soon she is on the ground with two women sitting on top.

When Myrtille produced the knife, three other men rushed to her aid. They were intercepted by Parsley and his colleagues. Incensed that their leader was hit, they put up spirited resistance. More operatives come to Parsley’s aid and two police officers arrive on the scene. The three men are soon handcuffed.

“Stop the procession! Clear the area!” Shouts the Baron as he waves his special permit at them. They leave to do his bidding. The lead carriages move forward and the following carriages stop where they are so a gap is created.

Baron Bruno looks at the wagon. Nothing unusual. He looks underneath and sees the wires. “There is a bomb!” he cries. Pierre comes over. “Let me have a look. I know a bit about electrics.” He dives underneath. Definitely a bomb. He shouts out, “stand well back! There is a timer with two minutes left!”

“Come away! Leave it, it is too dangerous!” shouts the Baron.

“No! I can do this!” He looks again at the wiring. A simple device with timer and battery. ‘Could I be wrong?’ he thinks, ‘they could have installed a tamper proof system. Pull a wire and bang! Goodbye Parsley Pierre.’

He follows the wires to the holes in the wagon's floor. 'Tick tock tick tock' went the timer with one minute left. He had to act now.

"Get away!" he shouts. He sees legs backing away, further away. He closes his eyes and yanks the wire away from the timer. Peace. No explosion. He rolls out from under the wagon.

"It is safe," he declares. His colleagues surround him. "Pierre! You did it! You are amazing!"

Claudette hugs him. He is trembling and she notices. With tears in her eyes she whispers in his ear, "thank you Pierre!"

Monsieur Court Manteau, the head of the Bureau de Sanitaire, appears. "Monsieur, this man has just disabled the bomb!" says one of the operatives.

"Well," replies Parsley Pierre with modesty, "I just did what anyone would have done."

"What is your name Monsieur?" asks the bureau head.

"Monsieur he is Pierre Plinkoff from the owl depot," says a very proud Claudette.

"And the timer on the bomb had thirty seconds left!" said a colleague who had just emerged from under the wagon.

"Monsieur Plinkoff," said the bureau head, "you have been very brave. You put your own life in danger to save others. This bravery will not go unrecognised."

Baron Bruno was watching. His alert eyes were scanning the area. 'Any more interruptions?' he asked himself. Suddenly Meldy and her friends burst onto the scene. Seeing Myrtille du Malcontent being restrained by two police officers, they could not resist some catch up taunting.

"You're an evil stinkpot!" sang Nicky.

"Hope you don't enjoy your 20 years in prison!" added Meldy.

"Ha! You think you've won!" hissed the captive.

"Ha!" replied Raoul, "because we have!"

"We are the heroes and you are a zero!" added Paul as she was led away.

Meldy then turned and saw the familiar face. “Parsley Pierre! There you are!” she cried, “I thought I saw you!”

“Esmeralda,” asked Monsieur Court Manteau, “do you know Monsieur Plinkoff?”

“Oh yes, I met him at home. He’s honest and he keeps his promises!”

Claudette looked at Pierre with renewed respect. ‘He told me he had returned the medal,’ she thought, ‘but I could never be really sure. Now I am. As Lady Esmeralda says, he is honest. He kept his promise to me and he is a hero as well!’

“Parsley Pierre,” continued Meldy, “we’ve been looking for you. Sir Desward’s in trouble and Lady Pastena says only you can save him!”

“Why is he in trouble, Lady Esmeralda?”

“He did some trading inside, I mean insider trading. Well he didn’t but they say he did and all the reporters are hanging around and bothering Lady Pastena and he’s innocent! I know he is!”

“Pierre,” asked Claudette, “is he your friend?”

“Yes Claudette, we have known each other since we were Lady Esmeralda’s age.”

“Then you must go and help him.”

“Yes, I must.”

Baron Bruno had been talking to the police. “This man has been very brave,” he said as he nodded towards Pierre.

“And you too Monsieur,” replied the officer.

“I prefer not to be recognised if that is alright with you,” he replied. “I like to remain, how is it? Ah yes, incognito.”

The other miscreants were led away and the bureau operatives went back to their wagons. Monsieur Court Manteau went over to the owl depot group and stood with Parsley and Claudette. Meldy and her friends returned to their carriage, a signal was given and the procession was resumed. The bureau operatives gave the Princess and her father rousing cheers as they passed. When level with Monsieur Court Manteau her carriage stopped. After climbing out, she walked over and asked to speak to the person who had disabled the bomb.

“It was Monsieur Pierre Plinkoff your Highness,” came the reply as Pierre was indicated.

“We thank you for your bravery and quick thinking Monsieur Plinkoff,” she said.

“Your Highness, I just did my duty. My colleagues here did theirs as well.” He indicated the men and women standing nearby.

The Princess thanked them all then asked Pierre a question.

“Are you from England?”

“Yes, your highness.”

“Some of my ladies in waiting are also from England.”

“Yes your highness, I met Lady Esmeralda when I was there.”

She looked again at Pierre. She now knew he was not from the England across the border. He was from the parallel world. “Ah yes,” she replied, “you were in Wood Tofton then.”

He realised she knew about his origins. “Monsieur Plinkoff,” she said, “we will not forget your bravery. Now the parade must continue.” The men and women of the bureau bowed as she returned to her carriage.

“So that was the man who disabled the bomb?” asked her father.

“Yes father. One of my first duties as Empress must be to award medals for bravery.”

The procession moved forward. Word had passed through the crowd lining the route faster than the participating carriages so soon everyone knew about the failed attempt at disruption. Myrtille du Malcontent and her henchmen were on their way to the police cells while Paul and Raoul, mindful of their place in the royal chapel choir, had left the procession to be taken through the back streets to St Peter’s Cathedral. They had to change into their robes ready for the arrival of the royal party.

When the procession reached the Cathedral, the carriages were vacated one by one and the important guests were ushered to the front of the grand building. The choir, in their traditional places, were already singing as Meldy, Sophie and Nicky walked up the steps to the main entrance.

Kick, Popster and Antoinette followed close behind. Antoinette, as a participant, had a reserved seat near the choir while the twins sat next to Meldy and her friends.

While walking up the steps, Antoinette had whispered, “I wish you were playing for me Catherine, I am feeling nervous.”

“You’ll be brilliant!” replied the twins, “just think of us singing at home when we first met.”

“I will. A treasured memory.”

The ceremony itself had to be adapted to the new circumstances. No previous Emperor in the Departement de Londres had ever abdicated and all previous Coronations had happened after funerals.

A fanfare announced the entry of the Emperor and he proceeded at solemn pace down the aisle. He signed a declaration and repeated, “I renounce my title of Emperor” three times. He then added that his daughter, Princess Augustine, should succeed him before he sat at the end of the Wagley sister’s row of seats.

Princess Augustine was announced with another fanfare and the choir sang a beautiful piece while she took her place on a centrally located throne. After promising faithfully to uphold her duties she was crowned by the Arch Cardinal of Londres.

The audience gave her three rousing cheers and, after a prayer and anthem from the choir, Antoinette stood up to perform her piece. ‘She’s still nervous,’ thought the twins as their friend stood ready to perform. Her expression then changed to one of calm serenity. ‘Now she’s thinking of that treasured memory,’ thought Kick. Antoinette smiled, nodded to the accompanist and gave a flawless performance. Kick, Popster and Meldy had been holding hands from the moment she stood up. Then Meldy felt another hand reaching for hers. It was Sophie’s.

After her performance, Antoinette became famous. Offers flooded in from all over Western Europe. Everyone wanted to hear this brilliant young soprano.

“The strange thing is,” she confided later, “I am happy here. I want to help our new Empress deliver her program of change.”

“That isn’t strange,” said Popster, “that’s laudable. It’s something you really want to do and it will make you happy.”

“Yes Antoinette,” added Kick, “it is admirable. You can use your gift to help others. You can promote Empress Augustine’s work to your audiences all over the country.”

“And there’s always the Wood Tofton music festival next year,” added Popster. “Everyone is still talking about you. We were asked only the other day where you were performing next.”

“What did you say?”

“Oh, we muttered something about the crowned heads of Europe.”

“And you’ll get a really large audience if you come again,” added Kick.

“What will Trebiana Tipperley have to say if I appear?”

“She probably won’t be there anyway,” said Popster.

“Well, wherever she is, I am sure they will like her.”

“Well I hope she likes them,” mused Kick.

Meldy couldn’t stop praising Antoinette. “You were amazingly stupendously brilliantly brilliant!” she chanted. “What were you thinking about when you were smiling? Before you started singing?”

“My three wonderful friends from Wood Tofton.”

On the day after the Coronation, Antoinette took Kick and Popster back to her house for a visit. Georges the coachman drove them via the Grand Boulevard and they were soon recognised in their open carriage. Many people cheered, others applauded and there were cries of ‘Encore! Encore!’.

Antoinette asked Georges to stop. She stood up, bowed to her audience then sang part of her Coronation piece. The crowd clapped and cheered enthusiastically. One woman stepped forward and, though outwardly smiling, hissed,

“Sit down! Now you will do as I say then you will not get hurt!”

Four men appeared behind her. Producing rather vicious looking swords they threatened the onlookers. People shouted at them and some started to advance which resulted in more angry sword waving. “Keep back!” they shouted.

“What do you want?” asked Kick.

“Hah! You thought it was over. Well my fine friends it is not!”

Antoinette urged Georges to drive away. “I cannot!” he cried, “they have blocked a wheel!” Popster turned to leave the carriage on the other side but there was a man in her way.

“Baron von Kühlschrank!” she cried.

“Count to five then go!” he shouted to Georges as he disappeared underneath. They heard a knocking noise then a wooden block slid out towards the sword wielding quartet.

Georges cracked his whip and the carriage lurched forward with the woman still clinging to the door. The occupants tried to dislodge her but she was strong enough to hang on. The swordsmen turned and chased after them. Popster, furthest away from their unwanted passenger, looked behind her but their rescuer was nowhere to be seen.

Suddenly his face appeared looking directly at her. “You again!” she laughed. The Baron had been clinging to an axle and he now climbed over the back and fell onto the floor between them. Struggling to his feet, he grabbed hold of the woman and dragged her into the carriage.

“Sit on her,” he cried. This they did with much struggling and complaining from their prisoner. She had a hooked nose, green eyes and short black hair.

“Who are you?” asked Antoinette.

“It is Maxine du Malcontent,” replied the Baron. “I have never met her but who else could it be?”

“You stupid idiots!” she shouted, “you will never win!”

Georges looked round from his driver’s seat, reached into a locker and seemed to be groping around. Finding a piece of rope, he handed it back to the Baron who managed to tie up their reluctant passenger. Producing a scarf, he gagged her for good measure. Behind, her henchmen were still in pursuit.

“Faster,” cried Antoinette, “they are still there!”

“Do not worry” said the Baron, “there is a police checkpoint ahead.”

The pursuers, realising their leader would soon be arrested, turned to make good their escape. Some fitter members of the public were still following and now they had been joined by some operatives from the Bureau de Sanitaire who raised their shovels in menacing fashion.

Desperate to escape, the quartet parried their swords and, intent on stopping them, the operatives set too with their shovels. One had to be fit to be a Bureau operative and their deft use of their tools soon resulted in victory. The four henchmen were

disarmed and gripped by members of the crowd who dragged them over to the police officers.

The Baron stood up, and, taking hold of the rope, dragged Maxine out of the carriage. The three friends saw him wave his identity card at the police and they also saw the respect afforded. Maxine, still complaining, was led away.

“Who are you?” asked Antoinette when he rejoined them.

“I am Baron von Kühlschrank, we met at the palace. Do you not remember?”

“Yes,” said Kick, “but you are more than that. Are you some sort of secret agent?”

“I am, honourable ladies, someone who wishes to see you safely to the Court Manteau residence. Shall we go?”

“Well,” said Popster, “whoever you are, thank you. Things could have got really nasty back there.”

“So Myrtille du Malcontent has a twin sister?” asked Antoinette.

“What are the odds?” laughed Kick.

“Extremely short actually,” replied the Baron as he made himself comfortable.

“There are actually three of them. You have yet to have the honour of meeting Mathilde. She is the oldest and meanest and she looks a lot like her twin sisters. She is at present in prison in my country but when she gets out...”

“You did not mention them when we met before,” pointed out Antoinette.

“So you do remember me at the palace,” he said with a gracious smile. “If I had mentioned them, what purpose would it have served? You had not met Myrtille and Maxine had obviously been keeping a very low profile.”

“Well,” mused Popster, “I think you did the right thing. There was no harm done and you were there when we needed you.”

“I think he was there before we needed him,” mused Kick. “That would account for the fact he was on the scene when necessary!”

He inclined his head as if to say ‘well spotted!’.