

Chapter 25 Time to go home

Preparations for the musical evening proceeded apace and the house was filled with the sounds of singing and piano playing.

“I wish I could do that,” said Nicky while he listened to Raoul and Paul rehearsing their contributions.

“I don’t know how they can be so brave,” replied Meldy. “They’re singing on their own. I’ve sung in a choir at school but I wouldn’t sing a solo ‘cos I’m not very good.”

“Well Popster is, so what went wrong with you?”

“Well why can’t you play the piano like Eustace? We’re all different aren’t we?”

“Where’s the Baron?” asked Nicky who was keen to change the subject.

“He’s practising somewhere else. He wants to surprise us. Oh, guess who’s coming as well? The alien man, Parsley Pierre. He’s going to get a medal for bravery and Emile’s going to take a lie detector test. I hope he passes.”

Emile did pass. The police concluded he was telling the truth but the question remained, had he broken the law by associating with Myrtille and Maxine du Malcontent? He could be guilty of conspiring to disrupt the coronation procession.

It was seven o’clock next evening when the royal carriage turned into the entrance passageway and swung round in the yard behind the house. Sounds of the quartet tuning up drifted through the open door while Monsieur and Madame Court Manteau waited to greet their important guests.

The step was lowered allowing the Empress and her father to alight. Meldy, inside the house, could see them approaching but she had been forbidden to mention Emile until later in the evening.

The quartet played the national anthem and the guests bowed or curtsied. The Empress smiled broadly at Meldy and Sophie as she passed to take her place in the Grande Salle. On her way she stopped to have a brief word with Pierre Plinkoff who was there with his partner Claudette.

The first half of the evening started on schedule and everything went to plan. Antoinette and Popster sang both separately and together and they were accompanied by Kick who then played for Raoul and Paul. After some enthusiastic applause, it was the Baron’s turn.

“Your Majesties, Monsieur and Madame Court Manteau and esteemed guests,” he said, “I sincerely thank you for making me so welcome in your country. I have enjoyed my time here to such an extent that it is with great reluctance that I must soon leave to return to my homeland. While here, I have been honoured to meet some truly impressive people who would not accept an illegitimate attempt to overthrow your government. Two of these are to be honoured tonight just as others were honoured here a relatively short time ago.”

He continued, “we have heard performances of a very high standard this evening and I hope my own humble effort will meet with your approval. It is a song about exploring other worlds and the challenges one could face if one was fortunate enough to be able to do such a thing.” After a short pause he nodded to Kick who sat waiting at the piano.

She had the music but had not heard it sung before. Both she and Popster knew at once he had written the words himself and they had been chosen with them in mind. There was mention of parallel worlds and travel between them, also the idea that some guiding hand could have controlled the traveller’s arrival. The song ended on a melancholy note, it suggested that one would have to make painful decisions about where one belonged and it was inevitable that it would be necessary to say goodbye to some dear friends.

The twins were not the only ones who understood what the song was about. Pierre Plinkoff looked at Claudette and squeezed her hand as if to say, ‘I’ve made my choice and my future lies here.’

The Baron received enthusiastic applause and then the first half of the evening was concluded. The Empress was hardly out of her chair before Meldy pounced.

“Your Majesty,” she said as she curtsied, “can you help Emile? He didn’t really do anything and he likes horses and....”

“Lady Esmeralda,” she replied, “I do not comprehend. Who is Emile?”

Meldy calmed down a bit and explained the situation. Empress Augustine listened then promised to look into the matter. She excused herself and went over to talk to Pierre Plinkoff.

“Monsieur Plinkoff,” she said, “I hear an opportunity has arisen for you to return to your home early tomorrow. I understand Master Nicholas will accompany you. Please will you look after him. You are, of course, familiar with the journey and he is not. I also hear you have a request regarding the bravery award?”

“Yes your Majesty, I will certainly look after him. Concerning the award, I do have a request, that is, if you are in agreement.”

After he had stated his case, she said she would comply with his wishes. Monsieur Court Manteau came over and he was seen to nod in agreement before the Empress moved on to talk to Baron von Kühlschrank.

“An interesting song your Excellency,” she said. “I wonder what inspired you to choose that particular subject? I understand your country has a rich tradition of folk melodies, we would like to hear some of these at some future time.”

“Your Majesty, as I said, I have met some interesting people from a variety of lands while I have been here. One particular trio has intrigued me, I have so far not managed to find out their origins....”

“Your Excellency, is it not the case that a little mystery makes life so much more interesting?”

“So, your Majesty, I will not be solving the mystery on this particular visit. I suspect that it is not a mystery to some but I am willing to remain in the dark if it is your wish.”

“Let us just say it is in the gift of the individuals involved to divulge the truth. We are, however, truly grateful for their visits and also for the assistance you have given us during your stay. We will be sorry to see you leave.”

“You do me a great honour, your Majesty, when you credit me with such useful assistance. I just did my duty as a public spirited guest.”

“Lady Esmeralda has asked me to help someone called Emile. Do you know his circumstances?”

“Yes your Majesty.” He explained the position and added that he felt this particular individual was not a threat.

“She also said he likes horses. I think the implication is that a horse lover cannot be a bad person.”

“Would that it were always true your Majesty but in this case I think she is right.”

The second half of the evening was much appreciated by the audience. After the applause died down the Empress stood up to address the guests.

“Once again, Madame Court Manteau has put together an excellent evening of entertainment. As well as Chevaliers Paul and Raoul, we have had the Quartet in

addition to Ladies Antoinette, Patrice and Catherine. Much to our surprise, we have been particularly impressed by a new addition. Our esteemed visitor, his excellency Baron von Kühlschrank, has proved to be an excellent tenor. We are sorry to hear he will soon be leaving us.”

She continued, “as you know, we recently found it necessary to arrest some more individuals who were intent on taking control of our country. Many brave citizens acted to frustrate their efforts and now I wish to acknowledge these individuals. First, for bravery and inventiveness which directly led to the capture of some of his kidnappers and the positive identification of one of the ringleaders in the plot, Master Nicholas Berrington is awarded the order of Napoleon the Second. He will also be given the honorary title of Chevalier.”

Nicky bowed as he accepted his award. “Thank you so much your Majesty,” he said excitedly.

“Thank you Chevalier Nicholas,” she replied. “You too will have a place in our history books. The boy who proved the red pen is mightier than the sword!”

The audience laughed and applauded as Nicky returned to his friends.

After this there was another award. “Many individuals contributed to the defeat of the takeover attempt but two stood out. One wishes to remain anonymous and the other has expressed a wish that his should be a collective rather than an individual award. It is therefore with great pleasure that I award the order of Napoleon the Second with laurel leaves to the Bureau de Sanitaire in honour of the many employees of that organisation who played such an important part. When I questioned his wish, he pointed out that every employee would have acted in the same way if called upon so all should be honoured. Monsieur Court Manteau has agreed to accept the award on behalf of the organisation and it will be displayed at a location where all of the employees will be able to view it.”

Monsieur came forward to accept the honour and there was a rousing cheer from the audience.

Early the following morning, Claudette was driven with Pierre Plinkoff and Nicholas Berrington through the empty streets of Londres to the Place de Napoleon. Meldy had wanted to go with them to say goodbye to her friend but she was fast asleep at the time so Amelie did not want to wake her.

Alain Court Manteau met them in the square and told Pierre and Nicky where to stand. Claudette hugged them both.

“Look after Nicholas,” she said, “and help your friend to clear his name.”

“I will. Nicky lives a short distance from the woods but I’ll see him to his door. Then I’ll search my records for the proof I need to help Sir Desward. I know I have it.”

“The sisters will follow tomorrow,” said Alain as he looked at his watch. “You have five minutes. If you wish to return here, you should have an opportunity exactly one month from today.”

“Well, I will see you then. I am coming back.”

He hugged Claudette again, shook Alain’s hand and went over to stand next to Nicky who was already waving goodbye.

After they had gone, Claudette wiped away a tear and Alain noticed.

“Do not worry,” he said, “he will be back.”

“I know he will try but there could be danger. One cannot be certain it is safe.”

“Many things in life are uncertain. By all current logic you two should never have met but accidental uncertainty brought him here. He will make every effort to return, if not in one month then soon afterwards. He has a bright future here now.”

One day later, after a final visit to the palace, Amelie came to wake the sisters. It was time to go home. After all they had seen and done they were sad to leave what had become their home from home but they were missing their parents.

“Come on Meldy,” said Kick, “they’ll be waiting downstairs.”

“I want to watch them hitching up the horses.”

“You can see them better out in the yard,” said Popster.

“I like watching from up here.”

“Meldy, we have to leave now,” said Kick.

Monsieur and Madame were waiting downstairs to say goodbye. “You are like family now,” she said as she hugged them. “Also, we so enjoyed meeting Nicholas. You must bring him again.” Antoinette and Sophie then joined them.

“Now it is your turn to visit us,” said Kick.

“Can we?” asked a tearful Sophie.

“Of course,” added Popster. “Our parents really liked you both. They’d be pleased to see you again.”

“You’re our best ever friends!” sobbed Meldy as she hugged Sophie.

The carriage was waiting to take them to the Place de Napoleon. George checked they were seated comfortably before driving them out of the yard via the entrance passageway to the road. Through quiet streets they rode, silently they sat as they looked out at a group of Bureau de Sanitaire employees making an early start to their labours.

“Bonjour, Lady Antoinette,” said one group as they passed. She was now very well known due to the publicity given to her Coronation performance and her role on the Assembly of Advisors.

“Bonjour Messieurs et Madames,” she replied. Meldy noticed their wagon already had a new logo painted on the side. She knew instantly what it was. It was the order of Napoleon the Second with laurel leaves just like her’s. ‘They don’t award them to just anybody!’ she thought.

Sophie and Meldy rode in silence. Soon Meldy’s arm found its way round her friend’s shoulders. Sophie asked, through her tears, why Meldy could not live closer.

“I wish, I wish,” she replied. “What does my mummy say? Absence makes you grow fonder but I couldn’t like you any more if I tried!”

“Yes,” said Antoinette, “I feel the same about you all. But we must make the effort to keep visiting each other.”

“Yes,” said Popster. “You will come to see us soon, won’t you.”

“This time we’ll take you to our London,” added Kick, “so you can see what it looks like in our world.”

“Oh, I do not think....”

“Or we can stay at home,” she replied. “We know Eustace wants to see you again!”

“I would like that. All your neighbours are so nice.”

“We could organise a concert in our church,” suggested Popster. “I’m sure we could persuade Trebiana to sing as well.”

“It would be a sell out,” said her twin sister. “Everyone is still talking about you. We have to invent ever more elaborate reasons why you haven’t come back!”

“Last time we said you were touring South America!” laughed Popster.

When they arrived in the square, Alain was waiting for them. “We have just over ten minutes. Once again, thank you for all you have done for us. I am sorry I could not spend more time with you but things at the university....”

“We understand Alain,” said Kick.

“Why don’t you come with Antoinette and Sophie,” asked Meldy. “Our daddy would love to meet you!”

“Yes, I would like to meet him too. He is an engineer and a scientist so he will have a lot of experience which could be of value to us. Ah, now it is time to stand near the statue.”

After more hugs and tears the three sisters left their friends and walked over to the spot where the gateway was known to exist.

“Who’s that?” asked Meldy as she pointed past their friends.

“Where?” asked Popster.

“I see him but...wait a minute! It’s the Baron!”

It was the Baron. He stood at the edge of the shadows cast by the rising sun and, after a brief pause, saluted them. Uncertain at first how to respond, Meldy and her sisters saluted in return.

A few seconds passed then they were there no longer.