

"Let's hurry, Mahiette," says Oudarde Musnier to her guest. "We don't want to miss the flogging."

"There's a crowd near the bridge. Is that the place?" asks Mahiette. This is her first trip to Paris.

"No, listen," Oudarde says. "That's little Esmeralda, the gypsy. Come and see her. She sings beautifully and she's the best dancer in Paris."

"No, we can't go near her," says Mahiette. "She'll steal my son. Don't you know the story of Pâquette la Chantefleurie?"

"No, please tell me about her."

"Pâquette la Chantefleurie was a pretty girl from Rheims, my hometown. As children, we went to the same school and often played together. When we were only fourteen years old, Pâquette came to school with something new. She was wearing a beautiful gold cross around her neck. The next day, she was wearing a pretty new dress. Her father was dead and her mother had very little money. We knew that the new things were from a man. Pâquette sold her body for these nice gifts.

"Then her mother died. Pâquette was alone and had to make her living on the streets. By the age of twenty, she looked old and sad. But then the best thing happened to her. She had a beautiful baby girl, and she became beautiful again, too. At last, she had someone to love. She was a wonderful mother."

"How did they live?" Oudarde asks.

"Pâquette had to sell herself again, but she was happy. She used all of her money to buy things for Agnès, her baby. Agnès had the most beautiful clothes and even a little pair of pink shoes. I saw the baby once. She had golden skin and big black eyes and black hair. She was a happy baby, too, and her mother loved her more every day."

"It's a good story," says Oudarde as the women walk along. "But you haven't explained about the gypsies."

"One day, a group of gypsies came to Rheims. People were

afraid of them because they seemed different, maybe even dangerous. They could look at a person's hand and read the future. Pâquette took Agnès to the gypsies and asked about the baby's future."

"What did they tell her?"

"One old gypsy said, 'She'll be a queen.' So Pâquette felt happy and wanted to tell someone about Agnès's good luck. When the baby was asleep, she hurried to a neighbor's house."

"What happened?"

"While Pâquette was out, the gypsies broke into her little house. They stole Agnès. Some people saw them with the baby, but the gypsies quickly disappeared into the night. They left a little boy in Agnès's bed. He was about four years old, and the poor thing was an ugly hunchback with bright red hair and only one eye. Pâquette screamed and cried, and a neighbor took the boy away. Nobody knows what happened to him."

"But what happened to Pâquette and her baby?" asks Oudarde.

"Pâquette found one of Agnès's pink shoes on the floor. She searched for the gypsies, but they were gone. Her hair turned gray during the night, and she disappeared from Rheims. Now do you understand why I don't want my child near any gypsies?" asks Mahiette.

"Yes, of course," says Oudarde. "But, look, here we are at the Tower of Roland. The cake is for Sachette, another poor, unhappy woman."

The two women look through the window of Sachette's prison. Sachette is silent. She is very pale and thin and has long gray hair. She is looking at something in the corner of the small, dark room and does not notice the women.

"This is strange," says Mahiette. Tears are running down her face. "What's the witch's name?" she asks her friend.

"We call her Sachette."

"And I," says Mahiette, "call her Pâquette la Chantefleurie. Look