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Opening extract from

Madame Pamplemousse and the Enchanted Sweet Shop

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Chapter One

In the city of Paris, in the middle of the River Seine, there is an island called the Isle Saint Louis. To Parisians, however, it is also known as the 'Enchanted Isle', owing to its strange air of quiet in the busy heart of the

city. On the Enchanted Isle there are no monuments or buildings of note, but instead shaded avenues, narrow cobbled streets, and a number of specialist food shops, florists and boutiques. And it was here that, one day, a sweet shop appeared.

The sweet shop was brightly coloured, with grape-purple walls, a peppermint-blue door and an awning of strawberries and cream. The shop's name was 'Sweet Dreams' and it was owned by a woman called Madame Bonbon. A plump, buxom lady with rosy cheeks and a warm smile, she looked like a favourite aunt or ideal



nanny; the kind of person you might turn to if you ever needed comfort. And comfort was just what the girl needed whom she found crying in Notre-Dame.

Notre-Dame Cathedral was a short walk from the sweet shop, as it was on the adjacent island, the Isle of the City. It was a cold afternoon in late January the day Madame Bonbon found the girl. The cathedral was mostly empty, with only a few lone tourists wandering through the candlelit gloom. There was a smell of incense in the air and also the faint sound of quiet sobbing.

Madame Bonbon found her in a dark corner of the cathedral's nave, sitting behind a pillar so that she was hidden from view; a girl

slumped forward in an attitude of despair, her whole body shaking with tears.

'Oh, my little poppet, whatever can be the matter?'

At the sound of the strange voice, the girl started.

'Shh, it's all right,' whispered Madame Bonbon, sitting down beside her. She reached out to envelop the child in her arms. This provoked an unexpected flood of fresh tears, but Madame Bonbon rocked her gently until they passed.

When, eventually, the crying ceased, Madame Bonbon reached into her bag for a tissue.

'Thank you,' said the girl, taking it while

moving fractionally away. She had become embarrassed at crying on the woman's shoulder. 'I'm sorry to be such a nuisance. I should be going home.'

'Don't be silly,' said Madame Bonbon. 'You're not a nuisance at all. Now then, dear, are you going to tell me your name?'

The girl looked up at her with red, tear-filled eyes.

'My name's Madeleine,' she said.

Madeleine had stopped by the cathedral that day on her way back from school, seeking a quiet place where she would not be disturbed. She was in a state of great distress, but the source of her grief was something so shameful that she had not been able to

share it with another soul.

'Thank you for your kindness,' said Madeleine, trying to break free from the embrace – the woman's perfume was very strong and she was beginning to find it suffocating, 'but I really ought to be going home now.'

The woman smiled, shaking her head. She did not move her arm from about Madeleine's shoulders.

'No, really,' said Madeleine, becoming somewhat alarmed. 'My parents will be wondering where I am.'

'Of course you shall go home, little poppet,' said Madame Bonbon, 'but not without taking a special box of my sweets!'

Before Madeleine could object, Madame Bonbon took her by the hand and led her out of the cathedral into the fading winter light. The wind had picked up and they walked briskly to avoid the freezing gusts, crossing over the water on to the narrow streets of Saint Louis.

Madame Bonbon's sweet shop was on the island's main street, tucked in between a restaurant on one side and a florist's on the other. It had a sign above the door with a picture of a crescent moon against a starry night sky. The moon had a face and was smiling. Sitting on his chin was a girl with fair hair, eating from a big box of sweets. Madame Bonbon





removed a note that read *Back in five minutes* and opened the front door.

The shop's interior resembled a stage set from an old-fashioned theatre. It had high stone walls and wooden beams across the



ceiling. The walls were hung with velvet drapes in shades of blue and purple, and were interspersed with mirrors, creating an illusion of depth. Lighting came from hanging lamps in the shapes of



stars and crescent moons.

Next to the door there was a counter, with sweets stored behind it in tall crystal jars.



Madeleine could see aniseed balls and acid drops, sherbet fruits and gobstoppers, caramels and sugared almonds, cherry

lips and fruit jellies, jelly beans and fizz balls, multicoloured liquorice, a rainbow of lollipops, and bonbons in toffee, lemon and strawberry flavours.



The shop's specialities were arranged about the room in their own individual displays. These were in the form of miniature stage sets, with dolls acting out scenes behind a pair of blue curtains. There was a display for chocolate sardines, which consisted of a seabed with a mermaid sitting on a rock, combing her green hair. Another, for coconut-flavour toadstools, showed a winter forest, with little fairies and ugly pixies hidden in among the trees.

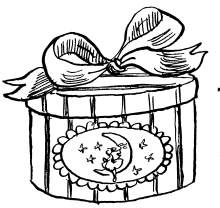




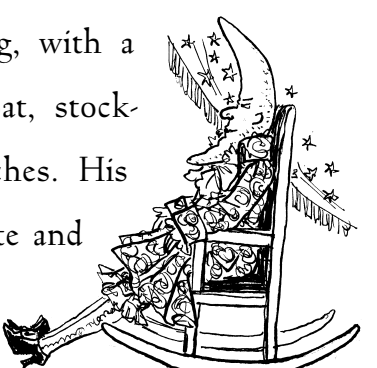


The most striking display was for

a kind of white chocolate truffle that came in



the shape of a crescent moon. The truffles were packed in blue boxes, with a label showing the same image as on the shop's sign. The little stage set consisted of a room that you peered into through the curtains. In the room there was a fireplace with flames made of orange paper, and a doll sitting next to it in a rocking chair. He wore eighteenth-century-style clothing, with a long, silver frock coat, stockings and knee breeches. His face was painted white and shaped like a crescent moon.



'Would you like to try one?' asked Madame Bonbon.

Madeleine glanced round. She had been so intrigued by the display that she hadn't noticed Madame Bonbon standing right beside her.

'Oh! No, thank you,' said Madeleine. 'I was just looking.'

'But I insist,' said Madame Bonbon. 'They're my speciality – you won't have tasted anything quite like them before.' She opened her hand to reveal one of the moon-shaped truffles. 'Here,' she said, handing it to Madeleine.

Madeleine thanked her and put the truffle in her mouth.



The outer shell was made of white chocolate and tasted richly of vanilla. The chocolate was quite solid and she had to bite firmly to reach the filling inside. This suddenly flooded into her mouth, some kind of velvety smooth liquid. It was sickly sweet and treacly, but with a bitter aftertaste. Altogether it was quite unpleasant and had Madeleine been alone she would have spat it out immediately – but just then she was surprised by a sudden onrush of joy.

Without understanding why, Madeleine felt radiantly happy. It was a bizarre feeling made all the more peculiar by knowing it could not be real. Only a moment earlier she had felt miserable and it was not that her troubles had

disappeared, merely that she no longer cared. At least not for as long as she was eating the truffle. As she swallowed the last of it, so her old mood returned. Except now it was much worse. Earlier she had felt bad but there was a new edginess now, a sense of anxiety as if she were not quite herself. The feeling was dreadful and she knew the only way to dispel it would be to have another truffle straight away.

Madeleine looked up to find Madame Bonbon watching her. There was a strange intensity about her eyes.

'Did you like it?' she asked.

'Yes, thank you,' said Madeleine. 'It was delicious.'

Madame Bonbon smiled. 'Well,' she said,

handing her a midnight-blue box. 'Why don't you take some home. And then, when they're finished, you can come back for more. Would you like that?'

'Oh, yes,' said Madeleine, nodding. 'Yes, I'd like that very much!'

As she took the box, Madeleine noticed something peculiar about its label. The eyes of the grinning moon seemed much darker than before. With a slight shiver, she also noticed something about the girl sitting on his chin. It now struck her how uncannily like herself the girl looked, as if Madeleine had been the model for the picture.

