

White Cargo 11

Last time we heard of Felicity's first real speaking parts, literally thrown on to the stage by her father to play Macduff's son in *Macbeth*, and then resorting to sticking notes to herself all over the set to help her when she played Puck in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and all this before she was quite twelve.

Episode 11

'She did well, didn't she, Yo Yo?' was all that Geoffrey said of my Puck performance, but he evidently decided I was ready for responsibility. Soon afterwards he made me the official counter of luggage. I was given a book and in it I had to itemize each and every bag, trunk, bedroll, basket and bundle. There was one column for personal bags and another for costumes and scenery. Geoffrey wrote in his diary:

One of Felicity's most important jobs is looking after the props. As we can't carry props for 15 plays, Felicity is responsible for borrowing what we don't have on any given day. At six she was helping, at eight I gave her her first salary book, now at eleven she gets ten rupees a month, which she writes down in her little green book.

She goes to the local convents when she can. There is no finer school than learning the art of backstage work, regardless of whether she will be an actor or director. At the end of the show she returns the borrowed items with thanks to those who kindly assist us. This is teaching her to deal with different people all the time.

This was all very well for him to write. I had to go, legs atremble, with my 'list' to the headmaster's study, or to some terrifying Mother Superior, or the Officer in Charge. It was a nightmare, but by the time I was twelve years old I had learnt to ask, if not demand, the props and extra mirrors and tables we needed for any given show. I could not return empty-handed: it was the prop wallah's job and I was the prop wallah. From a shy and timid beginning, I became a little tyrant, and if it had not been for Mother's firm hand I would have grown unbearably bossy and rude and would no doubt have lost us a few dates in the process.

The list, which I had to present to the relevant person in authority, was always the same and had been printed up by Geoffrey:

Shakespeareana

STAGE REQUIREMENTS

1. Dressing accommodation.
2. Washing water.
3. Drinking water.
4. Six small desks or tables.
5. Six small stools or chairs.
6. One straight-backed armchair.
7. An electrician.
8. A dhobi for pressing costumes.

Please have these ready on the stage two hours before show-time.

Thank you.

I was also in charge of making scrolls and letters. Parchment was achieved by singeing the edges of a piece of paper with a candle, then 'smoking' it with the same candle to make it look old. I had to paint the crowns and caskets gold and silver; and hammer bottle-tops flat, making a hole in them with a nail, then paint them silver and sew them on costumes to make armour. Swords had to be polished and unbent after every show. On *Macbeth* nights, I helped to make up the witches' cauldron with salt and methylated spirits, mix blood for the various murders and set out the drums and thunder sheets. The more I proved my capability, however, the more my workload grew. Next I was put in charge of the prop trunk, prop bags and the footlights, despite my protestations that the footlights were not strictly speaking props. I was shown how to set out the prop tables on either side of the stage and how to read the list of props for each play from the prompt copy. I knew most of it already, having helped to fit-up all my life, but now it was my responsibility, and the grim realization of my curtailed freedom was beginning to dawn on me.

At the beginning and end of every journey, I had to tick the number of pieces. This was a dreadful task, as they were forever being altered and half the stuff divided between hotels and theatres. I had sleepless nights, terrified that something would be lost or stolen and that Shylock would not have his dagger and scales to claim his pound of flesh.

After a few weeks of this insomnia, I refused to continue. Geoffrey relented and responsibility for the props and scenery was handed over to Frank Wheatley, while I still had charge of the personal belongings. That was fine by me: no one possessed anything of any value, so mislaying a case would never be as disastrous as losing costumes or make-up. Frank meanwhile held us up for hours while he slowly counted and re-counted the twenty-odd pieces of gear, then, with shaking hands (his hands always shook), licked his pencil and ticked off his list.

'Get a bloody move on, Frank!' Geoffrey would exclaim in exasperation. 'We can't wait for you to dither about like this. I'll give the job back to Foo if you're not careful!' Frank took no notice: he was completely unflappable. Only on one occasion did I ever see him getting even the slightest bit distressed, and that, of course, had to do with his teeth.

We were playing *Julius Caesar* at a convent in Kerala. The school had no stage, so we were performing on a flat and very polished floor, with the audience in chairs just a few feet away from us. I was now playing Lucius, Brutus's boy servant, a part I hated, partly because I had to sing a song to him in the tent scene and felt embarrassed by my less than presentable prop harp with its loose string, but mainly because, after the dreadful harp episode, I had to fall asleep on a gold painted cloth which gave off fumes that made me faint. The quarrel between Brutus and Cassius goes on for an eternity and I would undergo a series of panic attacks. All this made me dread the bookings of *Julius Caesar*, but the performance that afternoon was to be one I enjoyed – and poor old Frank was the cause.

The Reverend Mother was enthroned in the centre of the front row. Octavius Caesar, our dear Frank, had not on this occasion fixed his false teeth in properly and, on the line 'Defiance, traitors, hurl we in your teeth!' he hit the 't' in the last word so hard that his own dentures flew out and landed on the polished floor in front of him. He bent down instantly to retrieve them, but as

ever his hand shook, and instead he flicked them across the shiny floor, where they came to rest at the feet of the Reverend Mother, who without a word bent down and put them in her sleeve, then carried on watching the play as if nothing had happened. It was so awful that nobody laughed. Frank found it hard to speak for the rest of the scene, and I was sent round after the show with a tea-towel to retrieve the offending objects from the Reverend Mother. It was to be many years before I was to encounter the glamorous side of showbusiness!

*Your cough is better and you look more rested, though you still frown when I touch you and stroke your hair.*

*Tried to read from Kim, but halfway through a chapter you groaned and sighed, which was disheartening and which I took as criticism, so I've stopped. Showed you a lovely photo of Yo Yo in India; you seemed to focus on it for ages. No groaning and sighing then!*

*Last night I dreamt that she came back and lay beside you on a big white bed under a punkah. She was looking very lovely with her hair all soft and curly. She lay down beside you and stroked you in the most loving fashion. You seemed peaceful and happy. It was a beautiful dream. I woke up, made a cup of tea, and read till the early hours.*

*She seems to be about more and more, my mother. I hope that does not mean that you are going to join her. I've just found a way of spending time with you and not feeling anguished and depressed. Working here in your room, scribbling away. This is good. So don't leave me just as I've found a way to cope.*

*This place is costing a fortune, such a shame, because I'd so much rather give it to you to spend. You always liked a bit of cash.*

Money had always been tight, but was beginning to get tighter. The days of the Rajahs were fading and, after a bad flu epidemic that closed hundreds of schools and lost us a lot of bookings, the company was under strain. In Rajasthan we performed in a cinema, and Mary and I slept in the projection box. I would curl up in my bedroll halfway through the last film and go to sleep with songs ringing in my ears and the flickering of the screen above my head.

We must have been stone broke. Apart from a few nights sleeping on railway platforms, things had never been as desperate as this before.

The next date proved even worse. In Muzaffarnagar, a town north of Delhi, a large marquee had been erected to house an audience of over 600. We played for two nights to full houses and endless curtain calls. But Geoffrey was worried. 'I can smell a rat here,' he said. 'I should have seen the takings by now.' The organizers turned up as we were getting ready on the third day, to explain that no money had been made at all so far.

'It's very regrettable, Mr Kendal,' I heard one of them say. 'We are very sorry about this unhappy turn of events, but we have not collected from the audience what they are owing, and due to this most erratic situation we cannot pay your fee.'

'What the bloody hell do you mean?' roared my father. 'Every sodding seat was sold!' 'No, no. We sold only 200 seats, sir, and that has to pay for the advertisements.' 'What advertisements? There are no advertisements!

Christ Al-bloody-mighty!' raged Geoffrey, becoming apoplectic. Just then John Day turned up, dripping wet. 'There's a boy over there,' he cried, 'trying to set fire to our ticket stubs in the pouring rain!' We raced to the scene, and sure enough hundreds of used ticket stubs were crammed into a bucket, spilling over the side. 'Right, everybody. Pack up,' barked Geoffrey. 'We are leaving this God-forsaken joint immediately!' Mother's letters home during this period were growing plaintive:

I wish I could send you some coins, but I haven't drawn my salary for three months now, the firm has needed it! Jimmy sent me a pair of BEAUTIFUL nylon tights from America. I've told him the next thing to send is a millionaire.

There had always been cash flow problems, mostly because the organizers did not pay the agreed amount. Once Geoffrey stopped the show in the middle after a season of packed houses and no money. The students who had paid nearly started a riot, so half the money for that show was handed over. After the show the organizers left town.

During these times of poverty we travelled third class. Unable to book in advance we had to push and shove to get seats on the narrow wooden benches. There were 'passengers' even in the lavatories, and the floor was covered with chickens and children.

A short phase of peevish anger engulfed me during this period. I had had enough of adventure. I was fed up with being hard up, with midnight journeys to godforsaken towns, playing to students sometimes my own age, who did not work and who were free at the end of the day to play games. I wanted desperately to be a secretary, to learn to type and work in an office with filing cabinets and phones to answer. I would dream of living in a small house with an upstairs. My name would be Brown or Crawford and I would be *normal*.

Although Mother was adamant that good manners were essential for young ladies, I would get 'Never put shoes on a dressing room table,' 'Never whistle in the dressing room' in place of the usual 'No elbows on the table' and encouragement to help old ladies across the street. So I was learning fast, but not the same set of rules as most young girls.

Geoffrey, meanwhile, drilled me in good practice on stage. The list of practical advice that he wrote out for actors still makes me smile – and still holds good.

The curtain always goes up and always goes down. What happens in the middle is your affair.

If you really dry up look hard at another actor. The audience will know it is him.

Enjoy being nervous. If you are not nervous before you go on, it is best to take another job, you will never be an actor.

In love scenes, remember – the audience must be thrilled, not you.

Drink cold water before you go on, never alcohol. It may make you think you are giving a great performance, but you won't be.

Even at our lowest ebb, there was light relief. John Day was often at the centre of it, and his daft practical jokes kept us going. But now he was to return to England. Shortly after his departure, Frank wanted to go home. Geoffrey set about recruiting new actors. We took on two new actresses, one

of whom, Coral de Rosario from Bangalore, was very good at playing young men and old women, and between her and Mother, who for a short while played Oberon, the plays continued with some degree of chaos. But when Peter announced soon after Frank's departure that he really had to go back and earn some money, casting became critical. Another man was needed.

Jennifer suggested a young actor, Shashi Kapoor. She had met him briefly in Bombay, and he was as smitten as she. This opportunity to work together was, Jennifer said, 'fated'.

Mother wrote home:

The new boy is going to be brilliant as Laertes and Sergius, and Jane is very happy, she is coaching him on his lines. After all, the poor boy has to learn nine parts in a few weeks! I must say, they make a very attractive couple.

There was no hint in those first days of what was to come.

End of Episode 11