

White Cargo 4

Felicity Kendal, remembering her early life while sitting at her father's bedside, toured India for the first time with his theatre company when she was only nine months old. But her father, Geoffrey, had to bring his company home to England because of the disruption caused by Indian independence and Partition.

Episode 4

The voice on the answering machine was calm. 'This is Sister Margaret, Felicity. Just wanted you to know that Geoffrey has a fever and is quite poorly. We've called in Dr Patrick, and we're keeping an eye on him until the doctor gets here.'

I sat down at my desk, feeling suddenly tired and useless, when a moment before I had had had boundless energy. Not now, I thought. Oh God, please not now Not with twenty minutes to spare before I leave for the theatre tonight.

I got into the car and drove down to the Embankment, into the square where there was never anywhere to park. I left a note on the windscreen, 'FATHER DYING.....GONE TO HELP'. I ran into the nursing home, racing up the stairs.

I hardly know what to feel, now that I am here with you, and you are not dead, and not dying, but most definitely getting better. The nurse has just come in to say that since this morning, when they left me the message, your temperature has gone down and you are stable.

The crisis, well, this crisis, has passed, and for the moment at least we can continue as before. I have fifteen minutes now before I usually start to get ready for The Seagull, so if I leave now it will be a tight squeeze, but I should make it. I like to get there an hour before every show, a habit drummed into me from years of your indoctrination. 'Always give yourself time before and after a show,' you would preach. 'Never ever turn up in a rush at the half!'

You started training me early. I can't have been more than five years old when you put me on stage. We were playing Wellington, which was also the place where John Day joined us

'Would you like a toffee?'

'I beg your pardon?' said Geoffrey.

John Day proffered the crumpled bag of sticky sweets with an engaging smile.

'No, thank you. I never eat between meals,' said Geoffrey stiffly. 'Do sit down.'

John flung his lanky 6ft 3ins frame into a chair.

'I'm about to be called up in a couple of months, but I want to do something I'll enjoy before it's too late so I'm here for the job of ASM, please.... Are you sure you wouldn't like a toffee?'

So went the story of John's first meeting with Geoffrey, who was so taken by this 'gormless, spotty youth' that he hired him on the spot. John got the job of assistant stage manager and took to it like a natural. He even lived in the theatre for a few weeks, cooking stews in the prop room, until there were complaints from the front of house. He was committed to living life to the full, and would laugh like a drain or burst into tears of grief or frustration at a moment's notice. He hurled himself at life like a bouncy puppy, and was still only when he was asleep.

The company was playing a season at the Wellington Baths while trying to get enough money together to return to India. We must have been very hard up: home was a one-roomed shed behind the theatre. It was quite warm and cosy, with a gas fire and candles, and Mother cooked porridge and sausages on a tiny stove. There was no running water, and we used the lavatory in the theatre, which was no fun in the middle of the night, but every two days Mother would take me and her 'smalls' to the public baths, which was quite an adventure.

For a few pennies we got a small bathroom with a gigantic tub filled almost to the brim with steaming water. Mother would lower me into the tub and then scatter in her panties, stockings and bras. Then she would get into the tub herself, and proceed to wash us all vigorously with a large bar of Lifebuoy soap.

Those days were the highlight of my week. Mother loved a good wash more than almost anything, and it put her in a jolly mood. She would sing to me and joke and tickle, among the floating clothes, steam rising around her flushed face.

It was during one of these bathtimes that she broke the news.

'Daddy's going to send you on next week as a changeling boy in *The Dream*. Would you like that?'

Would I like it? I was thrilled. I had in fact already made my stage debut. At a few months old, wrapped in a spare cloak and lying in a basket, I was carried on stage, again as the changeling boy in '*A Midsummer Night's Dream*.' Mother was playing Titania, the company was on tour, as always, and it must have saved having a babysitter.

This second appearance was to prove much more memorable. I now felt, at the advanced age of five, confident and ambitious. A small costume was made: the red turban and gold anklets I remember with pleasure. John Day rode out into the country on his bike and returned triumphant with a real bulrush. This was to be my spear. I would place it on my shoulder and march up and down beside the sleeping Titania, protecting her. Oberon was out to get her with his magic flower and make her fall in love with Bottom, who was my father. Titania, on this occasion, was my sister – but it all made sense at the time.

I don't remember rehearsing, but I do have a memory of sitting on John Day's lap, going over and over the line that I should exit on. Peaseblossom and Cobweb were to lead me on, but they had to leave the stage because Shakespeare said so, and my mother, playing Puck, was not in the scene and so couldn't help. I was to march up and down several times until Oberon came on, then I was to go 'Oohh' and run off.

I can still recall the feeling of the wooden stage beneath my bare feet, the warmth of the lights that blinded me at first and made the audience shadowy

figures in a dark pit beyond the footlights. Secure in my bright new world, I proudly put the giant bulrush on my shoulder and commenced my march, guarding my queen for all I was worth. I felt most important. On I went, up and down. I heard a voice. 'BooHughaoff!' it said. That was not my cue, so I carried on. Suddenly there was Oberon looming over me. He leant over me and hissed, in my ear this time, 'Booger off.' I had been so absorbed in my part that I had missed my exit line.

I fled from the stage in tears of mortification, and could not be consoled. It was at least three years before I could be persuaded to tread the boards again – and my second attempt was not much better.

John was called up at last. He left with tears and great, chest-racking sobs. We heard within a week that the thought of spending two years with the army had sent him 'funny', and that he had thrown himself out of the first-floor window of his barracks dormitory with a dramatic cry of 'I can't go on! I want to end it all.' He landed in a bush, and so escaped injury, but the authorities decided the army would be better off without this crazy individual. He was discharged, to their mutual relief. Two weeks later he turned up with a large home-made pie for the company, which he unwrapped with a flourish from his suitcase of socks and underpants.

Geoffrey was trying to collect a cast that would follow him to the Far East. He was still smitten and determined to return to India, with Malta perhaps as a stepping stone. But it was to be months before he could organize the funds and the bookings.

In the meantime we toured..... It was the post-war era and things were tough. My memories are pretty bleak. I remember earache and measles in Ireland and always being in strange, smelly rooms waiting for my mother to come home after work. I remember the cold dampness of cheap digs on tour – a different town, a different bed, a different landlady to look after me every week, while my parents were working at the local theatre. I was not powdered or pampered. Someone was left to 'keep and eye' on me, I was always lonely and, it seemed to me, always cold.

Before we embarked on the return to India, Geoffrey managed to pull together a company for a short but ambitious season in Malta. It was to prove an invaluable trip. On the second night of the season the Governor of Malta came to the show with his guests, Earl Mountbatten of Burma and Countess Mountbatten. They came backstage after the show and invited the company to lunch. At the lunch there was talk of the company returning to India, and Lady Mountbatten promised to remember them to Nehru.

At the end of the season there was the usual problem with money. The hotel had not been paid, and Geoffrey was carted off to jail for a few hours. Lady Mountbatten was called on and Geoffrey was released. I don't know whether she stood bail or paid the hotel bill, but he was indebted to her forever. She was a true and very gracious patron, and did indeed pave the way between Geoffrey and Nehru, who also helped to get Geoffrey out of many tight corners. That they should spend time and concern on Geoffrey's bunch of 'tatties', as he called us, was always a mystery to me. But he was in his youth: dynamic, witty and very convincing, and he was providing something unique – Shakespeare alive on the school stages of the Far East. He returned to England, raring to go.

My happiest memories of those years in England were the occasional visits we made to Elmhurst, the family house I was born in. I remember the warm brightness of the place, and I remember Grandma. She was small and plump and her cheeks were soft and downy and smelt faintly of face powder.

The night before we left, we saw the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II on our neighbour's black and white television. Auntie Babs made trifle and jelly. I remember thinking the young Princess too pretty to be Queen and I remember her little boy Charles playing with her golden coronation bracelets. And I remember tears from my mother, because she was leaving for India in the morning and must have felt some premonition that she would not be back for a very long time.

For Mother, this would be the last time she would see Grandma, lovely, soft Grandma, defiant in her youth but cuddly now, the perfect grandparent to the children, lively as a cricket, full of jokes and patience, until six o'clock when she retired to bed with a full bottle of port.

The company that boarded the small steamship for India was headed by Laura and Geoffrey; then came their two daughters (Jennifer was nineteen; I was a plump six); lanky John Day, who was nineteen; Frank Wheatley, seventy plus; Wendy Beavis, who was twenty-something; and Brian Kellett whose age no one knew but who always looked fourteen. Then there was the small American girl, Nancy Neal, who didn't last long and who was in love with Conor Farrington, a tall, dark, dashing Irishman, who was very romantic and was always writing poems and plays.

For the first time since I could remember, Mother was with me all the time. She put me to bed; she was there at mealtimes; she played with me; she swam with me. There were no shows and few rehearsals, and for three weeks the company frolicked in the freedom of life on board. For Jennifer there were numerous flirtations with the handsome, white-uniformed officers who gathered about her like bees round a honey pot.

The sun blazed down as we steamed towards the East. Geoffrey was smiling and happy to be on his way back to the land he loved so much. With his knobby knees tanned beneath his shorts and his thick brown hair blowing in the salt breeze, a pipe in his mouth and a glass of beer in his hand, he stood swaying to the rhythm of the waves and described to me the wonders of the country we were sailing to. Then he would take my hand and lead me into the bowels of the ship, where, like a boy with a prized new toy, he would show me over the engine room. He would describe every piston and detail every nut and bolt. I would endure this with patience until he had satisfied himself with a job well done and we climbed out of the darkness into the blinding brightness on the lower deck. And all the time the warm air surrounding me like a blanket of comfort, the vast bright sky banishing for ever the small grey life we had left behind, of cramped terraced houses and digs smelling of damp and bacon.

End of Ep. 4