

White Cargo 12

Felicity's working life had begun in earnest, not only acting, but in charge of props, making props, looking after luggage - and she wasn't yet twelve. The company, 'the Firm', was having a bad time financially, cheated of their takings sometimes, and young Foo was rather resentful of her difficult life and dreamed of being a secretary with a little house and no more adventures. Some of the actors from the original company finally left for England, and new ones were recruited in India - one of whom was the young Shashi Kapoor, who was smitten with Jennifer, and she with him.

Episode 12

As an eleven-year-old, plump and painfully shy, I worshipped him, this tall, beautiful Indian actor that my sister had fallen in love with. He was funny and glamorous, the most flirtatious man I had ever met. The swagger of success was with him long before he became the number one Bollywood superstar.

Shashi was the son of a great and grand Indian actor, Prithviraj Kapoor, who had his own theatre company, very similar to my father, except that Prithviraj travelled with a cast of hundreds, cooks, cleaners, wives and children. Shashi's father was playing at the Royal Opera House in Bombay, and Shashi had a small part - he was eighteen and still learning his trade. He peeped through the tabs to have a look at the audience, and saw in the fourth row a young girl with long fair hair. She was pretty, laughing with her girl-friend. Shashi, according to Shashi, fell instantly in love.

After the show he raced front of house to introduce himself and to offer a guided tour backstage as an unusual treat, little imagining that was how Jennifer spent most of her life.

The next afternoon I was sitting in a Chinese restaurant, watching Jennifer and Shashi fall in love over their noodles. They would stay together till she died, through thick and sometimes very thin. She never did anything half-heartedly, my sister, it was all or nothing. And she had met in Shashi the man she wanted for ever.

It was not long before she had arranged for him to join our company. We had a two week season in Bangalore, and for five days Jennifer tutored Shashi until he was ready to take over as Gratiano in *The Merchant* and Sergius in *Arms and the Man*. He had never acted in English in his life and was shaking with nerves, but he carried it off with great success and was reluctantly welcomed into the fold by my father, who was never keen on any boyfriend Jennifer had. His possessiveness of her was absolute. He pretended that it was for her own good, or the good of the company: she being the leading lady, next to my mother, he didn't want to lose her. But it was more than that. Having left her during the war, I don't think he could bear the thought of her ever being away again. She felt something similar - she did, in any event, spend much of her life living and working with him.

But in spite of her love for her family, Shashi was everything in the world to her. Within six months he was playing in every show. They were happy and in love, but despite Jennifer's best efforts, a rift was growing between Geoffrey and Shashi. Already there was talk of marriage, and the possibility

of Jennifer leaving started a family storm brewing.

But then we were invited out of India for the first time in many years – to play a season in Singapore. We were bursting with excitement. The company had now played to a million people in India during the six years of its continuous tour and consisted of ten people. The cheerful, motley crew were set to take Singapore by storm.

This was to be goodbye to Mary. By now I was working in some capacity on most of the shows. I was out at the show every night, so Mary had no real function. I had mentioned this to Mother perhaps a year before, but she did not have the heart to let her go – and Mary wanted to stay with us forever. But now we were leaving India and so, with upset and tears, she was given a cash bonus and told that she would not be rejoining us when we returned. Jennifer pointed out that she could stay on and at least do the ironing, but I was growing up and I did not want an ayah. I was adamant: I did not want Mary any more. I got my father to agree – which was not difficult, as he saved a salary without Mary – and her fate was sealed.

The week before we left we spent in Bombay, doing up the set and costumes. The atmosphere was tense. Mary hardly spoke and did a lot of silent crying, her eyes fixed on me beseechingly.

At last we were boarding the ship to Singapore. Here, chaos erupted: Jennifer had not taken out the appropriate papers for the dog she travelled with, and three of the Indian actors, including Shashi, were turned back at emigration for not having the right visas. They had to stay behind and follow on by plane. Jennifer was in tears; Geoffrey sprinting from one crisis to another in a state of high agitation.

Mother, as always under these conditions, stayed absurdly calm. She always *sat* when things got hairy, even if it was only on the luggage, and she took on the air of a saintly martyr. Mary had come to see us off, and was standing weeping at the side of the gangplank, hysteria about dogs and passports and visas raging around her.

I had never been happier. I was leaving India for new adventure; I was leaving my babyhood in the form of Mary; my real life was about to start. I was full of myself and glad to be so. I gave Jennifer's dog a kiss, gave Mary a quick hug, and ran up the gangway.

'Darling, you didn't say goodbye to Mary, not properly,' Mother said. 'I did, I *did*,' I lied. 'It's not too late.' Mother pushed me to the steps. 'Go and give her a kiss, you horrid little girl.' I looked stubbornly ahead, refusing to budge. Suddenly it was too late. We were off. The ship slowly started to glide away from the side. Mary put her sari over her head, covering her mouth, and still she stood, staring up at us, not waving or moving. I looked down at her and, for a single moment, felt my heart would break. But it was only for a moment, and then I waved at her and turned away to continue my life without her.

My compulsion to move on, to leave places and people behind without a backward glance was to be demonstrated again and again.

The last time I saw Mary was on a visit to India after I was married. She came to Jennifer's flat for tea, bringing with her a little German girl that she

was looking after for a few weeks. She had lost her glorious smile. She was sweet to me, but I was a stranger to her now. After all the years of giving love to other people's children, no family would in return look after her.

On the ship, Jennifer decided to share a cabin with me, which I loved. It reminded me of times when I was little and she would cuddle up in my bed and sing me snatches of opera. I was startled when she climbed out of her bunk and into mine and burst into tears. She then proceeded to share with me her agony about Shashi. I found the turmoil surrounding her love life rather tedious – the tears and tantrums that accompanied their relationship bored my little head, and I listened with only faked interest as she poured out her anguish.

'Daddy has told me that it isn't Shashi he objects to it is just that he doesn't want us to leave the company. But Foo, Shashi doesn't want to stay with us forever. And why should I give him up for the sake of Daddy's company? I wish he would understand that all children grow up and want to leave.'

I nodded mutely, so she wailed on. 'I am made to feel selfish and inconsiderate. It's all too ridiculous and Mummy's gone berserk again and has started crossing herself and covering her chest with sacred hearts!' I had noticed this holy nonsense making an unwelcome comeback and agreed that it was pretty embarrassing. 'Anyway,' Jennifer said, 'Shashi's family are wonderful and they will accept *me*. So we will play the tour for the fixed time, then I'm leaving to marry Shashi, and that's that!'

We arrived to find the missing three already landed and Jennifer's Tibetan terrier in quarantine, where he would stay for the duration. There were a lot of tears and visits to the kennels and I was more upset than I realized by the constant moods surrounding me.

There were press conferences scheduled by our sponsors, and one long piece, headed 'Felicity's Good Life', talked about my vagabond lifestyle and how I was working full time at barely twelve years old. This had the undesirable effect of prompting a visit to Geoffrey from a health inspector, who said that I would not be allowed to take part in the plays, as I was under-age and it was against the law. His news tipped Geoffrey over the edge. A minor volcano of emotions erupted, with Geoffrey shouting so loudly that Mother left the room.

I don't know what happened next, but I do remember playing the first season, so I can only imagine that Geoffrey either bribed the inspector or lied about my age.

As was so often the case, the booked tour turned out to be a disappointment. The shows were full but somehow Geoffrey never made any money. So he took on further bookings, which exhausted the company and did little to help the ebbing morale. A theme park called The Great World had a large, open-sided hall with a rickety stage at one end, and we were booked in for two weeks to play *The Merchant* twice nightly.

The dressing rooms were sheds at the back, overlooking the café kitchens and the bucket loads of dead baby piglets, potatoes and gutted chickens that were piled high outside the entrance. The rains came and the roof of our

'theatre' was corrugated iron, so no one could hear a word most of the time. It was a dreadful two weeks, rescued only by the fascinating place in which we were staying.

We booked in at the York Hotel in Scotts Road, run by Mr and Mrs Soffelt. They were an elderly Danish couple who had lived in Singapore all their lives. They had both been tortured in a Japanese concentration camp, and this had so affected them that they now lived as virtual missionaries, letting out rooms for less than half of what they should cost to the semi-poor – a category into which we certainly fell. They had decided to dedicate the rest of their lives to looking after stray animals: this was their way of doing some good, after the dreadful experiences they had had. The strays they adopted became their family, with the guest-house providing the money they needed to run this menagerie.

Mrs Soffelt had once been a beauty. She was a tall woman with long legs, always in a hurry, her hair in a state of constant collapse. The style she started out with in the morning, all rolls and coils, was by mid-afternoon a haystack of pins. She applied make-up in a style frozen in time: her eyebrows pencilled into an arch of permanent surprise, her cheeks rouged with the lipstick with which she achieved a perfect pouting bow that lasted only till lunchtime. She gave everything her full if hurried attention, her large grey eyes beaming out care and concern for the world about her.

Mr Soffelt was equally kind, but quiet and slow, handsome with thick white hair and an even thicker accent. He looked after the financial side of the business. In the evening they would both stop work and sit on the lawn or veranda, dispensing gin and tonic and talking to some of their guests, all the while surrounded by their animals.

There were some thirty dogs of all shapes and sizes – some friendly, some considerably less so – roaming the lawns and corridors of the house. There was also a kaswaree bird (a small version of an ostrich). It never ventured out of the grounds for some reason, and it never attacked adults, but if ever I went out alone it would suddenly appear from behind a bush, fix me with its eyes, and letting out a bloodcurdling hiss, would charge at me full pelt with lowered head and huge flat feet flapping on the path. At the very last minute the ghastly creature would swerve and plod off as if nothing had happened.

Mrs Soffelt would sometimes take me on her daily dog-feeding journeys downtown. At the sound of her car, cats and dogs would appear from mounds of garbage and out of alleyways. She would dole out her slop with a great ladle into the road, checking to see whether any animals were hurt. If some needed help, they would be blanketed up and taken to the vet, or driven home. She was so in tune with them, and so fearless, that none of these wild things ever growled at her or bit her. Dog biscuits were always at hand and she was forever throwing them out of the car window at strays, narrowly missing pedestrians.

One morning we found the body of a little brown puppy perched on top of a rubbish heap. It looked so vulnerable I lifted it off, thinking I could bury it in the garden rather than leave it to rot like an old cabbage. As I carried the little bundle it opened its eyes. 'Mrs Soffelt, he's alive!' I cried. 'Well, bring him home then,' was all she said. I carried him back to the guest-house, nursed

him back to health and called him Rubbish. He stayed with us for the next few years.

Before long the Soffels had adopted us along with their menagerie, taking us under their wing and waiving bills when things got rough. And things were about to get very rough indeed.

End of Episode 12