

White Cargo 8

Last time we heard about a visit to a Rajah's palace where Felicity was given a baby deer, Raju, which she had to leave behind when they moved on. She made her mother promise that she could have a kitten as a Christmas present.

Episode 8

We were leaving for Delhi. The company was doing well, my father was riding high and even making a small profit, and I went to sleep on the top bunk of the train, dreaming of kittens and of Christmas.

I woke, as usual, with my ears full of engine soot, to the sound of orders being placed for tea. It was early morning, and the train had stopped at a tiny country village. Geoffrey took me along the platform to gaze at the wonders of the workings of the engine. The driver smiled down at me through his pan-stained teeth. 'Sahib, the train will be moving off to be departed soon!' he warned Geoffrey.

Inside our carriage, usually reserved for 'Shakespeareana' but this time for some reason booked for 'Mr Shakespeare and His Ladies', Mother was passing round the tea. Tea and toast was the staple treat on Indian railways. 'T-n-toast, sahib?' was the cry at platforms all over India. There was sometimes T-n-cake, but Mother would never allow that. 'Fly-blown, darling, don't touch it.' Fly-blown was a caution often used by Mother – pre-cut fruit, salad and cake were all susceptible to fly-blown, darling. So it was always T-n-toast.

The train gathered speed and I settled on the bottom bunk and looked out at the country I loved, enjoying its colossal size.

That evening we arrived in Delhi, the great walled city of the Mogul Empire. We were to stay at the Cecil Hotel, one of the best five-star hotels in the Far East. My father had befriended the owners during the war, and now returned with his company on a regular basis. I rushed off with Mary to unpack, taking in with glee the flowers and fruit laid out in the rooms, the eiderdown quilts, the exquisite chintz furnishings. This would be a Christmas to remember. We supped that night in the great dining room: there were sweet trolleys and flaming puddings and life was simply marvellous.

Mother's letter home:

Hotel Cecil, 1957

Dear Mother,

Here we are in Delhi. It is very, very cold and we are having a wonderfully successful time. All the seats are sold out for all the shows, and we have had to put on more matinees to accommodate the demand.

Tomorrow our patron, the Countess Mountbatten, is coming to see *The Merchant of Venice*. She is staying at Viceroy House with our other patron, Nehru. He has already attended two shows and this time came backstage to meet us all. He has very tight security all the time and there was someone standing guard at every exit and entrance on to the stage. This took a bit of getting used to, but it worked out well, except for the time I was waiting for my cue and the kind guard opened the

door on to the stage way before time, trying to be helpful, but leaving the actors on stage alarmed and bewildered by the door opening when no one was due to come through it.

Please send me some make-up sticks of 5 and 9 when you can.

Bye bye darling. X

Lady Mountbatten came backstage after the performance. She captivated Brian and John by remembering them from Malta. Everyone was very proud that our famous patrons took the trouble to visit the schools and see our shows, and when Geoffrey was also invited to lunch with Nehru at Viceroy House he was beside himself with excitement.

On the day of the lunch he had to give a performance of *Macbeth* at a Jesuit school, which didn't finish until twelve-thirty. As the company packed up, Geoffrey dashed out on to the bustling streets to hail a taxi, but the taxi got lost and Geoffrey was half an hour late. 'Bloody terrible it was,' he complained. 'Awful! I hate being late and a great crowd of people were kept waiting because of me. I had to battle my way to the throne room, all sweaty and still covered in some of *Macbeth*.'

He had first met Nehru ten years earlier. Geoffrey was constantly having trouble with things like income tax and railway connections. 'Always go to the top chap' he always said, and that is how he met Nehru, who invited him to a meeting to discuss his tax difficulties. They got on well, and these two unlikely men had many luncheons together until Nehru's death. Indira, his daughter, would often be the only other guest. 'She was often beside her father,' Geoffrey commented. 'She was quiet, but obviously very bright.' It was with Nehru's help that our Indian company members got passports, as the usual route could sometimes take years.

Our four-week season in Delhi was a triumph, which is more than can be said for Christmas Day, however. Although our shows generally played to packed houses, there was rarely any spare cash. The company was paid a pittance, and the journeys over the vast distances of India swallowed up most of the profit. Presents, therefore, were usually tokens. But a kitten cost nothing, so I reminded Mother of the promise she had made only a week earlier at the palace in Udaipur. I was horrified to learn that she had forgotten, or was pretending to have forgotten, about my longed-for little cat. Moreover, she even suggested that it was 'not a good idea to tour a cat, Foo.'

Broken promises are part of growing up, but this first lesson came, of all people, from my mother, who *always* kept her word. I went to bed in tears, aching for a tiny kitten to love and to play with.

'Shut your eyes and go to sleep, Foo,' my mother comforted me. 'Things will look better in the morning.'

'I'll never believe you again and I *won't* go to sleep!' I cried. But of course I did.

The next morning I was woken by a hissing, spluttering basket, wobbling and shaking at the bottom of my bed. My heart pounded. I *loved* my mother – she had not forgotten after all! I scrambled to untie the basket, and as I did so, a large cream and black monster leapt out, spitting at me. It pounced on my head, fixing its sharp claws into my scalp, biting and scratching. It all happened so quickly that I had no time to defend myself. I felt no pain, just

surprise, as I heard Mary scream out, 'Ay, ay, ay! Gow, gow ... ooot, ooot!' The beast was dragged off and my mother was called. She rushed in to see blood pouring down my face and my new pet crouching under the bed with its ears back, its tail swishing and its great blue Siamese eyes staring out from the darkness.

This was my 'kitten', this huge, nine-year-old, battle-scarred Siamese tomcat! There was a lot of washing of wounds with Dettol, but while my mother was sorry, she also seemed strangely determined to keep the creature, explaining that he was 'only frightened and would grow to love me'. But our first meeting set the tone for our relationship. The cat never loved me, in fact he hated me for the next five years of his life – and I hated him. I could never touch him without being attacked, whereas with Mother he was as gentle as a lamb, lying like a baby on his back in her arms, purring loudly.

She had found him on Christmas Eve being chased by a dog, his owner having gone back to England and left him at the hotel, where he became wild and uncared for. I pleaded with her not to take him with us when we moved on, but she had named the savage Sheba, and Sheba came with us; Mother's word was law. He travelled with us for the next five years. He never got lost, but stayed contentedly at the foot of Mother's bed wherever we were, making the occasional foray out to beat up native cats. He was a remarkable traveller: he even learned to use the keyhole lavatory on trains, and he always knew when we were about to leave, and presented himself, ready to be packed up in his basket.

When one morning in Darjeeling I found Sheba stone-cold dead, I was strangely moved. Jennifer told me that I jumped up and down, crying happily, 'Sheba's dead! Sheba's dead!' But I remember being unnerved by his cold body, and missing him on the long journeys. He had been my enemy for five long years, and I missed his aggressive, surly presence.

The visit to Lahore was not long after Sheba the Terrible was adopted. Mother had trained the beast to wear a collar, walk on a lead, and to keep quietly to his basket when the ticket inspector came into our train compartment (Geoffrey was never one to waste his money on fares for the cat)

In Lahore we stayed in a large guest-house run by a genteel old lady. The house was a tall colonial residence, once very grand, with large gardens in an enclosed compound shutting out the dusty streets of the city. The lady of the house was grey-haired and wore long, flowing dresses and beads. She taught me to play Patience on a tiny card table inlaid with ivory, using minute cards. She was a retired teacher and spent hours telling me stories of old India. I was told that she was the young English girl who had been dragged through the streets of Amritsar, which in turn sparked the terrible Massacre of Amritsar, when the British opened fire on an unarmed crowd. She would not leave India, and had stayed on, surrounded by English bone china, Edwardian furniture and her memories. She never married and now opened her house to passing Europeans to make ends meet.

The house was full of strange and interesting things for a child. It was a wonderfully creepy place, with corridors and staircases leading off long balconies. At the top of the house was a large nursery, with teddy bears and dolls, old and worn. A tiny cot with a lace mosquito net stood in a corner, and

an old train set that did not work was set up on the floor. I slept with Mary in this strange room. Who the nursery was intended for I never knew, since our hostess was a spinster. But no one knew much about her and no one was very interested in her, apart from me – there were plays to perform and bookings to make.

Jennifer's birthday party was celebrated with Jimmy blowing up 121 balloons and Mother taking me off to the bazaar and spending all her savings on a pair of 22-carat gold earrings. They were lovely, with a sun and moon and stars hanging down in delicate clusters. 'Don't tell your father how much they cost,' pleaded Mother.

The next day I heard bellowing from my parents' bedroom. 'You stupid bloody woman!' roared Geoffrey. 'I would have given you the money for Jane's present! I'm not a miser, for Christ's sake!' He was in a jolly mood, and not really angry at all. 'Come along, we'll go and get her something else as well.'

Back to the bazaar they went, with me in tow, and a small gold chain joined the earrings. I wondered what I could give Jennifer that would match the golden treasures she was getting.

That night, Sheba had a bloodcurdlingly noisy fight with the local cat, and came hurtling into my bedroom and hid under the bed. I bent down without thinking, and the terrified cat leapt at me and savaged my face in a spitting, clawing rage. Hours of mopping up later, Jennifer screamed at Mother that she was mad and bad to keep the monstrous Sheba, but I pretended that I did not mind. All that really concerned me was what to give Jennifer for her birthday. Poor Mother, tired and guilt-ridden, tried to soothe me, kissing and holding my wounded head that Mary had wrapped in torn strips of sheet. 'Darling, I'm so dreadfully sorry about Sheba, but I tell you what. *You* can give Jennifer the gold earrings. They can be from you, sweetheart. How's that?' 'That's fine,' I said, snuggling up on her bed. 'Thank you, Mummy.' I went to sleep, sore but happy. I had a glorious present for my sister, and I was sure that the hairy horrid would be left behind. The birthday party was full of balloons and surprises, and Jennifer was almost in tears, she loved the gold earrings so much. 'Oh, Foo, ' she kept saying. 'Oh, Foo.'

I was sad to leave Lahore; I had liked the lovely old lady, and my card skills had improved. But I was even sadder to see Sheba's basket, with Sheba inside it, loaded on to the luggage truck.

*Darling, you smiled! Not at me but at Kunal, your first grandchild, Jennifer's eldest son, your favourite. He is here from India for your birthday – eighty-eight tomorrow – and when he came into the room you stared at him and smiled. Maybe you are on the mend.*

*'Don't expect him to know you.'* So I told Kunal on the way this morning, and now this smile. Just for a second, but it was there, it was definitely there.

*So. Happy Birthday, darling. The family have just gone. We all gathered round you with champagne and balloons, and we had a sing-song and blew out the candles on the cake – your grandchildren and your one remaining daughter. Your birthday will not be celebrated tomorrow on the day itself. We*

*stopped marking it when Jennifer died thoughtlessly on the same date. It was fifteen years ago now. The whole family was together in London to be with her, and we planned to share your birthday round her bedside. But she died early that morning and we never celebrated your birthday again.*

*Was it really fifteen years ago? I am now the age she was when she died, and the last years have gone so fast, and my memories of her are still fresh and vivid.*

*No more smiles from you today, but that one you gave Kunal was like a miracle.*

End of Episode 8