

White Cargo 3

Felicity Kendal's parents, Geoffrey and Laura, returned to England and their daughter Jennifer after their wartime ENSA tour. Laura's pregnancy prevented their immediate return to India, Geoffrey formed another touring company in England, and Felicity was born when Laura stopped acting in the play *White Cargo* to have her. When Felicity was nine months old, the whole family went back to India to set up a new theatre company there.

Episode 3

Mother's letter home to her sister:

Fairlawn Hotel
Sudder Street, Calcutta

Hello Beula

We passed terrible floods on our way here, people living on roofs of houses.

Felicity rises with the lark. She simply gets up and murmurs 'Mama' through her cot bars. Honestly, she is so good. The order of her day is 6am up then out with Mary after milk and banana. 9am back for breakfast, and if no rehearsal we have her until lunch time whilst Mary does her ironing and washing and usually takes a rickshaw or taxi to do a little shopping. 12 noon Mary gives her a bath and lunch and puts her to bed till about three, then I have her for an hour, we have tea, then when it's cool Mary takes her to the park or Maidan till 6pm, then another cool bath and bed.

My earliest and most comforting memories are of the sounds of dawn in India. First the pigeons cooing, then the pye-dogs barking and the large black crows cawing. They would be joined by the local dhobi slapping his washing on the stone slabs, with a splat, bang, splat, as every button was broken in the effort of rendering the clothes spotless, if a little frayed. Days begin early in India, and soon these familiar sounds would swell to include the voices of vendors selling their wares, Muslim prayers being chanted from the mosque calling the faithful in to worship, and finally the continuous honking of cars and the ringing of rickshaw bells.

My day would start with sleepy visit to my parents' room. Wherever we were staying, I would pad next door or along the corridor of the hotel or guest-house, where I would find them already up and enjoying their early morning tea. I would have a sip of my mother's, hot and sweet, then lie on the bed with my head in her lap while she talked and argued with my father, who was by now prowling up and down the room in his lungi, already wide awake and planning the day ahead.

They would start to talk to each other the moment they woke up and continue through the day and until last thing at night. They never exhausted their interest in each other's point of view. There was nothing too important or too trivial to 'chew the cud' over, and with this came laughter, sometimes anger, and, on occasions, violence. At this age I had seen the shabby side of my father's character only once, and this was at night when he was drunk.

But in the mornings it was sweet tea and cuddles with Mother, she in her nightie and the hair rags that she slept in to curl her ramrod-straight hair, her sweet face devoid of make-up, and pretty. I would lie against her in the cool breeze of the fan, until Mary came to fetch me. 'Chullow, Missy Baba, time for your bath.' And she would lead me off to shower, then on to breakfast with the company.

Next to my mother and Jennifer, big black African Mary was the person I loved best. On my first visit to India, when I was a few months old, Mary was picked to be my ayah from groups of servants lined up on the quayside in Bombay Harbour, waiting to be chosen by the burrah sahibs and memsahibs as they disembarked from the S.S.Strathmore. There were lines of drivers, bearers, ayahs and maids, all hopeful of employment. Mary was spotted by Mother as the only one who was smiling. She was plump and commanding in a spotless white sari. Being the only black nanny on the dock may have contributed to the choice, my parents being drawn to the eccentric and unusual, but her great stature and glorious looks certainly played a part. She was large and beautiful, in an Amazonian way. She was, to my knowledge, the only black ayah in India.

Mother wrote home:

C/O Thomas Cook and Sons
Hornby Road
Bombay

Dear Mother

I must just tell you in haste that all is well. The AYAH IS MARVELLOUS! She is called Mary. They are fond of each other already. I must send you some snapsJennifer is enjoying herself immensely and the dress rehearsal today was surprisingly good. I must get some sleep now before the show tonight. It's beautifully cool in the evenings, and not too hot during the daytime. Very different from the last time we arrived here during the war.

All love, Bye Bye Darling, Laura X

Mary was to join the tour and look after me. For the next nine months Mary was on duty twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. She looked after my every need and slept in my bedroom. I was still being breastfed for some of that time, so a large part of Mary's job was working out where my mother was and then taking me, if Mother was working, to the theatre or to the rehearsal, then back to the hotel.

As long as she could go to early-morning mass on Sundays, Mary seemed not to want a life apart from me. She became a close and much loved member of the family. Mother adored her, and they would joke and cry together like mother and daughter. Mary had a great belly laugh and, apart from her moods, was a calming and soothing influence on everyone.

Mary could neither read nor write, and was given to embellishing her stories. So she may well have invented her past life, although the story she told never altered. She was born in Goa to an African father and Portuguese-Goan mother. There was never any mention of her mother's side of the family – something unheard of in the East, where extended families reached on into infinity. To have no family ties usually signified that you were an orphan or illegitimate.

She was married at thirteen to a local landowner, who beat her on a regular

basis. After a couple of years, when she failed to produce a child, this abuse escalated, and following a particularly brutal attack, she stole the few rupees she needed to take the long bus journey to Bombay. There she got a job on the outskirts of the city with a Goanese family. She stayed a few years, then moved on to other families. By now she spoke English and Hindi, and landed a job with the director of Bata Shoes in Bombay, staying until the little girl she was looking after went to boarding school. Then, having enjoyed working for her white memsahib, she turned up on the dockside, hoping for a similar post.

She was to be all mine. Looking back, our proprietorial attitude towards her seems appalling, but I felt that she *did* belong to us. And although my mother was hardly comparable to a real memsahib, she did expect total loyalty and a certain degree of subservience. But even if Mary was half slave, she was loved and respected, and there was a balance of power: she had acquired the weapon of being indispensable, and she could shake my mother's otherwise cool equilibrium with her rare but gothic sulks.

From Mother's diary:

Playing Macbeth tonight African Mary doesn't speak. She brought Felicity to me at tea time in silence. This mute fury will continue for a few days yet, and I will have to get out of her WHAT THE PROBLEM IS. THESE SULKS CAN GO ON FOR DAYS. Something is looming. But she still does her work and it makes no odds to Felicity.

Mary's silent tantrums were rare, but if the problem, whatever it was, was not solved, she would start to cry and ask to leave. Then my mother would cry and say she couldn't and call in Jennifer and Geoffrey, then, after a lot of wailing, Mary would end up with more money, and life would return to normal.

Every morning of my first tour of India as a baby, we would go through a ritual instigated by my mother. Mary would bring me out to the early-morning company meeting, and the company would greet us. 'Good morning, Felicity. Good morning, Mary,' they said solemnly, and then I would be taken away and the day's work could begin.

Once the company was rehearsing, Mary and I would go out. Sitting in my Victorian pram, I was wheeled through the gardens of the compounds. In the more remote parts of India, children would crowd round and stare, intrigued by my strange mode of transport, and even more by my colour. 'Why is your baby all white?' was the question they asked Mary most often. 'I dip her in flour,' she would reply. 'Every morning she gets a flour bath – and now she is white all by herself.'

This tour lasted nearly a year, from summer 1947 to the following spring. Jennifer was a thirteen-year-old actress, Mother was the leading lady, Geoffrey the actor-manager, and there were four other actors. Geoffrey was back in the land he had fallen in love with, but this time he was to witness the country shake off the shackles of the Raj, and experience the beginning of the end of British rule in India.

The company toured the princely states, giving private performances, but the political climate was becoming more and more unsettled. India was struggling to become independent, and the conflicts between Muslim and

Hindu, between Pandit Nehru and Mohammed Ali Jinnah, were coming to a head.

In the August before I was born, violent clashes had erupted, and Jinnah had called for an independent Pakistan.

In the general state of euphoria that accompanied Independence in August 1947, a few of the wiser were already cautious. The great Mahatma Gandhi from his ashram in Calcutta expressed his shattered hopes and dreams of a united land: 'I have no message to give Independence, because my heart has dried up.'

On the eve of the day of the Transfer of Power, when the Union Jacks came fluttering down all over what had been the Indian Empire, Geoffrey recalled seeing a flag being used as a duster on the verandah of the guest house. He described that time:

'Thousands squatted on top of railway trains, hoping for a free ride to safety. Slowly the refugee troubles and the great massacres became generally known. On our travels we saw more than most people. We saw the great columns in the Punjab, the millions of homeless camping on every railway station, with children and old people sleeping on the pathetic bundles of household goods they were taking with them, and some with nothing at all. All this has been described in novels and films, but we were there and got the feeling, and that feeling cannot possibly be put down on paper. It was more terrible than you can imagine, and it went on and on. I think Partition was a wicked thingthere was no need to split the land in two. It was 'The Devil's Wind' all right!'

There was unrest in the schools and colleges, and bookings became difficult. A British company was not so welcome at this time of unease. Then, one day in Bombay, they heard that the Mahatma had been shot dead in Delhi. India came to a standstill. There was a sigh of relief when it became known that he was not murdered by a Muslim – that would have doubled the blood bath. His ashes were carried out to sea at Chowpatty in Bombay, and my parents watched with thousands of others.

And then we left India. We sailed on the P & O liner *Strathaird*. As the Gateway of India sank below the horizon, it seemed that our life in India was over, almost like a dream. There were no rehearsals on board ship now that we were sailing the other way. It got colder and greyer, and we were just a few more of the Raj going home.

End of Episode 3