

White Cargo 2

In the first episode, Felicity Kendal told how she decided to write the book in her father's room at the nursing home, when he was seriously ill and speechless after three massive strokes. It was a way for her to have a conversation with him. She told of the row she had with him when at the age of eighteen she decided to leave his touring company in India and come to England to try to achieve an independent career.

Episode 2

The winter sun is shining through the window on to your candlewick bedspread....no smiles for me today when I came in, just turning away, you old bugger!

Your nails need cutting, and you are looking wild and cross.

I'm not having a good day. The play I'm in at the Haymarket is a flop, and we come off after only three weeks. You were very good at failure. You just carried on regardless, a couple of whiskies, a few shouts at Mother, and you'd pack up and move on.

I wish you could say something. But maybe you're just having a nice long think. Are you thinking about the tea plantations in the hills of India, sitting with your whisky watching the sun set over the plains beyond the valley? Or are you remembering tea and toast on the Punjab Express? Or the dhows on the Hooghly River, the breeze filling their sails as they glide up and down the brown water past Calcutta, unchanged for hundreds of years?

It was from Calcutta, after I had left you to try my luck in England, that you wrote to me about your autobiography:

My dear Foo,

I hope you're well and gainfully employed. I'm still on my Masterpiece and one thing is certain: that when I do eventually join my Fathers, there will be a hell of a lot of balls you can use for a fictional biography....I'm living a lotus-eating existence – without the lotus.

Reflecting on your bizarre existence, I think – But what a life. Swashbuckling your way through adventures and traumas alike, and, despite all the ups and downs, managing to achieve at least one of your ambitions: never, ever, to have owned a house.

Born in a small semi-detached in the town of Kendal, in the Lake District, Geoffrey was the eldest of three sons and christened Richard Geoffrey Bragg by his parents, a schoolmistress and a travelling salesman. After school, he worked as an office boy and then as an engineering apprentice, and was, in his words, 'hopeless at everything', until he joined the amateur theatre and found his true vocation.

He started as the lowest of the low: assistant stage manager in a provincial touring company. But he had found his life's work, and engineering was forgotten. He played small parts with a number of reps, then, at twenty-one, joined the Edward Dunstan Company. Cast as Romeo to Laura Liddell's

Juliet, he fell in love – both with Shakespeare and with his leading lady. She clearly bowled him over, if his description of meeting her is anything to go by.

‘She had a pointed chin and a round face, deep brown slanting eyes and an air of enormous vitality.

Never had I seen a more lovely woman, or a more interesting actress. I thought of her as a person absolutely delicious, and I did two foolhardy things that were in defiance of the old actors’ warnings. I carried her bag; and I allowed her to sew a button on my jacket without taking it off. I was terribly superstitious. I knew nothing could break her spell, and it never did.....We stayed with the company for three years, then we married, at Gretna Green, on a lovely sunny day in the spring of 1933. We had met at the age of twenty-one, and have stayed together ever since.’

As soon as they married, they started their own company. They had the princely sum of two hundred pounds. They bought some old scenery for fifteen pounds and put together a season of plays, although as yet they had not a single booking. They chose for their repertoire *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Macbeth*, *She Stoops to Conquer*, *Saint Joan*, and *Michael and Mary* (by A.A.Milne).

They were both in their early twenties, very much in love with their work and each other. Geoffrey was already showing signs of his eccentricity, coming up with ideas about cutting out all the scenery and relying on the spoken word. He was a rough-cut diamond next to Laura. He was abrupt and sometimes rude; she was soft-spoken and sensitive to other people. He liked to drink and be gregarious; she loved her solitude. Together they made a lifelong partnership that was indestructible.

These early days were tough, however. They toured all over England, but made very little money. Then, still on tour, Jennifer was born. Though my mother stopped work on stage during the last few weeks of her pregnancy, she continued to look after the costumes, and was in the theatre until late on a cold February night in Southport.

The landlady of their digs did not turn a hair when she was asked if the baby could be born in her house. She gave Mother a large supper before she went to bed and sent Geoffrey off to find the midwife. He wandered about the city for hours. When he finally found her, she promised to come as soon as she had finished delivering the baby she was already attending, and so she did. She was tiny and old, and walked through the night carrying her bag of tricks, to arrive with Mother just in time.

Jennifer was born in the early hours of the morning and bedded down in a drawer, as Geoffrey fell asleep, more exhausted than Mother and still half covered in make-up from the previous night’s performance.

A few days later Mother returned to work, with Jennifer in a basket by her side. Apart from rejigging rehearsals slightly to incorporate feeding times, the company’s schedule was scarcely disrupted.

Despite the Depression and the meagre bookings, Geoffrey was determined that he would always run a theatre company and always be his own boss. He changed his name, taking ‘Kendal’ from his home town – thinking it more glamorous than ‘Bragg’ and better suited to a romantic young actor.

When the war came, my parents’ lives were to change for ever. They were

offered the chance of touring with ENSA, playing to the troops in the Far East. This was a splendid job, and was to be for Geoffrey the beginning of a lifetime's passion for India. For my mother it presented an agonising choice: she could either go with her husband and leave her child, or stay in England, not knowing whether she would ever see Geoffrey again. She chose to go. I think it affected my sister for the rest of her life. Jennifer (or Jane, as she was sometimes called by her father) was to grow up with a certain coolness towards her mother and an exaggerated need to be approved of by Geoffrey.

Leaving Jennifer to be cared for lovingly by her aunt, they sailed off on a troop ship to an unknown destination. Jennifer was about eight years old. There are dozens of letters to her, filed away carefully by Laura, who must have retrieved them after the war. I found them among a lifetime of letters she had stuffed into worn and battered suitcases, hat boxes and old zip bags. The woman who had never owned anything much, apart from her books, had kept this record of her life and had travelled all over India with it tucked away in her cases. In later years, she parked some of them with Jennifer and some with me. I never bothered to look inside and had no idea of the family treasure they contained. Now, sitting in my small study, up to my neck in musty old papers, I learned a lot about her life with Geoffrey and glimpsed something of their bravery and madness.

The letters to Jennifer give the impression that Jennifer was painfully missed, and both her parents wrote to her almost every day.

Jennifer Darling,

We passed the famous Rock today! Tell grandad that this ship....can't give her name...was built in Barrow in 1926! Tomorrow we get our chocolate rations, I wish I could get mine to you....I write to you each day, Jane, but you won't know as dates are not to be mentioned, nor ports of call. It's pretty late, you'll be fast asleep.

Goodnight Darling.
Love you, Mummy. X

This last part of my mother's letter is heartbreaking now. Jennifer was to die of cancer thirty-eight years later, and she would ask for my mother to sing lullabies to her to soothe her off to sleep. Sitting in the darkened hospital room, I would listen to 'Rock-a-bye Baby' and 'Golden Slumbers' being sung to my grown-up sister. And when she eventually fell asleep, Mother would kiss her face and say, 'You're fast asleep. Goodnight darling...Love you.'

The tour played to the troops of the India Command and was a total success. The letters back to Jennifer spill over with enthusiasm and excitement. It was summer in India, and Geoffrey was clearly falling in love with this glorious land.

My dear Jennifer,

There are some lovely things in this country. Everywhere is so full of lovely colours – the dresses, the things they sell, it's all so grand. In the small towns you can watch people carving wood, making jewellery, lace and leatherwork, all done by hand. You can buy a piece of leather and have it made into shoes while you wait for about 30 rupees, and much nicer than you see at home. I am sending you some pretty white ones. I have got a Sikh teacher for my Hindustani, very handsome – six feet and bearded.

How are you? I have written 17 letters to your 4! Do you know that all the men wear their shirts outside their trousers in India? And they always piddle sitting down. I must change into

my 'Malaria Precautions' i.e. boots, long trousers, long sleeves. Damn silly isn't it? We put them on at sundown. We are off to the northwest frontier.

Rawalpindi
India Command

After a week in the train we arrived at the above. It's different from Bengal and Tibet, though we can still see the Himalayas. The people are taller and more Arabian, veiled women, donkeys, lots of monkeys, etc. You can get beer here WHOOPÉE! The theatre we play at is next to a mosque and every two hours the Muezzin calls the people to prayer – they call in quite a high, falsetto note, and they always do it during a quiet bit!

You are a fool to pay £6 for a watch. When I was a boy I wanted a watch and I pinched TWO.....Now I don't expect you to do that, but do be CAREFUL with your money, or you'll turn into a half-wit. The world is full of half-wits who waste their money. I'll be able to send you the £6 that you have spent in my next envelope. My word but it is hot here.

My love, you little gold digger.
Popeye.

Mother's reaction to India was more muted. She describes with some dismay 'the pavements covered with sleeping people' and the native quarters with 'men sitting on the pavement taking a bath with their clothes on, beggars, maimed and otherwise, dead cats and rats just lying about and garbage littered around.' Her fastidiousness made her recoil from the chaotic nature of the place.

But Geoffrey wanted his daughter to feel and share his passion. His letters burst with the enthusiasm that he wanted to communicate:

My Dear Jennifer

We are in Darjeeling, nearly in Tibet. A lovely place where I should like to live. The climate is like the best of English summer, there are no cars in the town, only rickshaws and riding ponies. And you can get a pony anywhere – children ride to school on them – there are lovely schools. The hills are covered in tea plants.

We went to a Buddhist Monastery today – you can see Everest when it is clear – it is only 50 miles away! We are halfway through our time in India now, we should be home in January. I hope you're having a good time, Jane. I wish I could bring you here. It's a wonderful country, full of strange and charming people -- all sorts – and everything is so different from the photographs.

Cheerio Jane Darling. Keep your bowels open.
Love Popeye

He was not to know of course that Jennifer would spend nearly all her life in India. Nor did he realize that he would adopt India as his home, returning with his company not once but twice: the first time with Jennifer and me as a baby, to tour for a few months; the second time when I was six, to stay for the next twenty years.

To begin with, however, my arrival scotched their immediate plans. When the ENSA tour came to an end, they were sent back to rehearse another play at Drury Lane and take it back to India. The war was over, so security was lifted. Mother however was pregnant and was not allowed to travel.

Undaunted, Geoffrey set up yet another company, and opened with an old favourite, *White Cargo*, by Ida Simonton. He described the circumstances in his book:

'For the first time since we had married, Laura was not there, for even in the final days of her confinement with Jennifer she had never left the theatre until the fall of the curtain on the night of Jennifer's birth. This time it was different. Laura's parents, who had moved to Olton in Warwickshire, insisted on her staying quietly at home. It was not for long though. I came home one night after a performance of *White Cargo* to find it was all over without my help. On 25th September we had another daughter. We called her Felicity.'

Nine months later we returned to India.

Mother refused to leave her children behind ever again, so this time, with Jennifer a beautiful, pubescent thirteen-year-old schoolgirl and me a plump baby, Geoffrey packed his family and the small company he had got together on to a ship and sailed towards the sun, leaving behind post-war England, food rationing, tatty dates and the coldest winter ever recorded. A nanny was to be found on arrival to look after me while Mother was working. Jennifer was to be put to work, as I would be years later.

There were no shows booked, but, undaunted and happy to be travelling as a family at last, my parents set off to fulfill their dreams of a life free from the mundane. They steamed towards the exotic land of princes and palaces, a place of warmth, welcoming them for the work they did and offering them a life of freedom and adventure.

End of Ep 2