

White Cargo 5

Last time, Felicity's father, Geoffrey, frightened her when he suddenly contracted a fever, but he had rallied by the time she got to his bedside. She reminisced about her life up to the age of six in cold, grey post-war England, travelling with her parents' company and making her first independent appearance on stage with them. But her father was determined to return to India, and we left them on the steamship on their way back.

Episode 5

At last, there it was, rising out of the mist and monsoon rain on the shore of our promised land – the Gateway to India. The dark stone monument built to commemorate the visit of George V and Queen Mary in 1911 stood proudly, looking out to the Arabian sea. Behind it was the Taj Mahal Hotel, like an extravagant wedding cake.

For Geoffrey, this was the moment he had longed for. He wrote about it in his diary:

There were the familiar sights I had missed for so long. The Dhows with triangular sails tacking across the Bay of Bombay, the noise, the bustle, the crowds of people waiting with flowers and garlands And Mary, with tears streaming down her face.

As if by magic, the ship glided into place alongside the quay. Gangplanks were lowered, and luggage offloaded; coolies swarmed about, sweaty and incomprehensible. Finally we got into the customs house, where customs officials were stamping passports and marking luggage. They had already been on board the ship, and had refused to let in the various daggers, swords, shields, spears and guns that were part of the props we carried, thinking we might be a small revolutionary party about to set up shop. It took three days to convince them to the contrary. By then we were installed at Green's Hotel, Byculla, and Mary was back with me.

Mother's diary:

Mary appeared – MARVELLOUS! What a difference it will be now. Foo thinks she's 'absolutely wonderful'. We have our first show the day after tomorrow, Macbeth matinee, and Twelfth Night in the evening at the Convent of the Sacred Heart.

Back in Bombay for the second time, my small, dreary, black and white existence in cold England was over; I was back in India, revelling in the heat, the smells, the colours.

There was always something astonishing to look at: astounding opulence next to medieval poverty; girl-mothers with wizened, crippled babies; grossly fat babus sporting diamonds and living in palatial villas in magnificent compounds. In the streets the smells of spiced food hung in the air, mixing with incense and the stench of sewers and decay. And the colour of the

place: the oranges and blues of silk saris and turbans, the garishly painted posters of film stars that smiled down upon the traffic and the chaos. Thin cats and mangy dogs would wander along with skinny babies among the rubbish on the streets, and the sacred grey brahmin cows sat in the middle of the road chewing the cud as cars and bicycles manoeuvred round them. This was my India, the one I will always remember. Man and beast cheek by jowl; life and death always apparent – and no embarrassment about either. Wedding processions would wind through the dusty streets, with the garlanded groom, his face covered by a veil of jasmine flowers, being led on horseback to collect his bride, while a gaily dressed band blew trumpets and beat on drums to clear his path.

Such moments would be celebrated with an open and abandoned display of joy, but sorrow would be equally felt. Through the same streets quieter groups would come, carrying a shrouded body on a simple frame, covered in white and heaped high with loosely strewn flowers. They would make their way to the burning ghats (a place, by water if possible, where the dead are cremated on funeral pyres). Sometimes there would be gentle singing, giving thanks for a long and happy life, but if the body was only small – and too often it was tiny – then the tears and grief would pour out for all to see. There was nothing reserved or half-hearted about life and death in India when I was a child.

Mary was at the centre of this revolution in my life, and it was through her that I experienced my India. In Bombay she would take me to Marine Drive, the three-mile crescent bordered with palm trees that led down to the beach, almost every evening after tea, as soon as the heat had gone from the day. The air was thick with the sweet salt from the brown sea, the smell of roasting peanuts, traffic fumes and sweetmeats being cooked by vendors crouching over their small charcoal fires in the sand.

As it grew darker we would walk along the Chowpatty Beach and Mary would buy one anna's worth of warm peanuts. Cold drinks to accompany the nuts were not allowed. 'Very regrettable, Foo Foo, baba, but definitely not allowed by Mummy.' The generous helping of Bombay Belly was no doubt the reason for this ban on the ice-cold drinks in garish yellow and green. Soda water was the only one allowed, and hot sweet tea, and neither did I ever want. If I plagues Mary long and hard, she would sometimes dig into her little cloth bag for a few annas, and I would get a ride on one of the small fly-blown ponies that trotted up and down the beach.

As the sun set we would wend our way back to the hotel. Mary would order supper on a tray before taking me to our room to bathe. This involved covering a flannel with Lifebuoy soapsuds and scrubbing me to within an inch of my life. Then she would rinse me off to make me squeaky clean. And then came the Johnson's baby-powder session, not to be underestimated in the warding off of prickly heat spots and heat rashes. I would be smothered in the stuff, then put into white cotton pants and a vest before supper. Supper was invariably fish fry and chips; if I was unlucky, rissoles or veg cutlets with peas. Mary would have a plate piled high with rice, crowned by whatever curry was on offer. This would be followed by jelly, cold sago pudding or the occasional fruit salad – all relics of the fast-fading Raj. Mummy would come in on her way to a show or a party at whatever club, school or theatre they were at that night. Then it was bed under the fan,

sometimes, depending on the mosquito alert, under a mosquito net, one white sheet to cover me, the lights turned off, and Mary would lie at the foot of my bed until I went off to sleep.

She would tell me stories until she fell asleep and started to snore, at which I would kick her gently with my toes, resting on her belly for comfort, and she would wake, saying, 'Sorry, Foo baba, Mary tired.' Then she would resume the story, combining Adam and Eve ('Adow and Iva') and the Garden of Eden, which she placed firmly in south India, with the folk tales of the Ramayana, featuring Francis of Assisi. Above us, as if by magic, lizards stuck to the ceiling and stared down at us, with eyes frozen and tails slowly twitching. Some were only babies; some had no tails at all. 'Why don't all the lizards have tails, Mary?' I would ask in the darkness.

'Because big lizard he fight baby lizard, but good ones 'scape and leave only tail behind! Now go to sleep, baba.' And she would snore softly again, while I drifted into a contented slumber.

So, that's done. I've cut your nails. You frowned a lot, but seemed to know what I was doing.

You have a bloodshot eye, probably from poking it with your long nails. It must be dreadful, dreadful, not to be able to move. Moving the one arm, sometimes at random, sometimes in a sort of rhythm, compared to the rest of you that doesn't move at all – could this be something of a triumph?

I think not speaking must be the worst, for you anyway. The silent days here bleed into weeks and now years you're not going anywhere, are you, darling? I thought it was only a matter of time, as they say, but you're not in a hurry for the end, and I'm glad.

In the first months I prayed for it to come, to release you, but I'm used to it now and the dread of losing you has returned. The feeling of security in having you there is strangely reassuring. I don't think you want to go, and even if you could speak and told me to pull out the plug, I still would not be able to consider such a thing.

'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio.....' than are dreamt of in our philosophy.

The company was thriving. It seemed in those early years we were on an extended summer holiday. The actors were all young, India was welcoming and full of hope for the future. There was little money to be made, but our work won tremendous appreciation, and it seems in those days that we never stopped laughing. The fit-ups were full of practical jokes and banter, the endless journeys by car, plane, truck, train and ferry were undertaken with enthusiasm and accompanied by songs and picnics. Working ridiculous hours and living sometimes in absurdly uncomfortable accommodation for very little remuneration, this merry band trailed around India from north to south, east to west; there was not a town, hardly a village that was spared.

Leading the way was Geoffrey, the bully with the heart of gold, the mad adventurer willing to go anywhere at the drop of a hat if there was a hint of playing a show for a few rupees, and often leaving in his wake a trail of debts

that he felt justified in not dealing with – justified because he was lifting Shakespeare out of classroom textbooks and on to the stage where he belonged.

Beside him was my mother, the power behind the throne. Calm, unflappable, aloof, although she seemed at times to be a little absent minded, she was in complete control.

She was always immaculately dressed. She would disembark from the train that had steamed over the plains of the Punjab for five days looking as if she had stepped out of a beauty parlour. The rest of us would be crumpled and sooty. But Mother would have showered in a toothmug, changed into a pristine pair of slacks and blouse, tied a turban round her sooty hair, put on make-up and sprayed on cologne. The fact that the next date might be in deepest Kerala made no difference: she turned herself out the same for Nehru as for the sisters at the local Bleeding Heart Convent School. Always the leading lady, always the maternal confidante to this varied bunch of travelling players.

On the train journeys, sometimes taking two or three days, the routine never varied. The bedrolls would be put out for the night, then Mother would get out the picnic: Spam and bread and butter was a big favourite; cheese and onions another, washed down with beer or whisky and soda. These were times of great enjoyment and relaxation – for however well or badly the last dates had gone, the next stop was bound to be a triumph!

Then, before lights out, Mother would get out her Flit gun and spray the corners of the berths and floor to discourage cockroach fever. As soon as it was dark, they would steal out to collect the odd crumb; if you put the light on in the middle of the night, the floor would appear to move. Flitting done, we would take it in turns to use the tiny bathroom off the compartment. As often as not, it had a keyhole loo in the floor, and the cat learned to use it.

On one particularly long, hot journey, John Day, who was leaning out of the door to catch the passing breeze, fell out of the train. It was not moving very fast and he didn't let go of the door, so he managed, after a few heart-stopping seconds, to haul himself back in. Mother, as she bandaged his bleeding head, could not resist quoting from *Macbeth*: 'Come let me scarf up the eye of pitiful Day.' We were not a superstitious lot, and a quick 'Enter Lavinia ravished' was said as an antidote to quoting the supposedly unlucky play.

In those years I was the company trophy. I was spoiled and teased and included in all the trips, the picnics, the horse riding, the swimming parties. And half my life was spent on trains or buses, making midnight departures, being woken and dressed to travel. I could sleep anywhere, anytime, I was never car- or sea-sick. I would curl up on my top bunk and listen to the grown-ups talk, until I fell asleep.

The journeys always started in the same way. From Bombay to Tokyo, they started with excitement and ended in a play. Every day Geoffrey would repeat his mantra at the early-morning meeting. 'We are all here because we love the world and want to be everywhere before we die. We want to see all sorts of people and meet all sorts of friends. We want to show them our plays, the best plays in the world – the plays of Shakespeare. And because to perform these plays in all sorts of places and on all sorts of stages calls for an almost impossible degree of concentration and nervous energy, and

because to arranged constant travelling is a constant source of worry in these officious days, I want you all to keep fighting fit. Do yoga, laugh a lot, and always breathe deeply. And when you have a problem, go for a walk and SING at the top of your bloody lungs that will do it!

'Now, then, what do we rehearse today? And are there any questions the company want to air?'

End of Ep 5