

White Cargo –10

Last time we heard about the start of Felicity's school life, much disapproved of by Geoffrey, but insisted upon by Laura. Wherever they were, she went to the local Loreto convent, and achieved the triumph of 'top in Urdu, bottom in English.'

When she was about nine, her father decided it was time for her to join 'the Firm' in her first speaking part.

Episode 10

My father was at last able to incorporate the Macduff wife and son scene in *Macbeth*, which he had usually had to cut for want of a small boy to play the son.

I had been rehearsed painstakingly for weeks, Mother and Jennifer taking me through my lines again and again till I was sick of them and knew them backwards. The first night, or rather afternoon, approached. We were to play a Saturday matinee at the very convent school that I was attending.

Most of the audience were already seated: the rows of eager students murmuring quietly, each clutching a school edition of the play; the line of nuns, gently fanning themselves with programmes.

Backstage the actors were making their last-minute, ritual preparations. Our dressing-room was a classroom, where Mother had draped blankets over a clothes-line to divide the women players from the men.

Jennifer, half dressed as the first witch, made me up, Mother being far too busy getting ready to play Lady Macbeth. Fidgeting nervously in the damp, sticky heat, I sat while she smeared thick greasy foundation on to my face. She grinned down at me. 'Don't worry, little Fatty Foo, it's going to be fine. There's always a first time for everybody!'

Mother kept an eye on this procedure from the mirror where she was applying 'hot black' to her eyelashes. ( Before false eyelashes were invented, actors employed this method: you melted a pea-sized glob of black wax stuff in a teaspoon over the flame of a candle, then applied a tiny amount to each eyelash with a paintbrush, drop by drop, until you built up a fringe of by now hard wax. The trick was not to inflict third-degree burns on your eyelids. My mother was an expert: from the front the result looked natural and very effective.) 'Jane – teach her to put her wig on properly.....' she called over from her school-desk dressing table. 'You must always anchor a wig firmly at the temples and the nape,' she instructed me. 'You never know what will happen during a show, and your wig must be part of you, never a hat.'

Jennifer finished my make-up, numbers 5 and 9 mixed to a pale tan, brown eyebrows where there had been none, a little shading round the chin. With my wig firmly in place, I was ready for the costume. Here again came training from my mother. '*Never* put on your costume before your make-up and your wig. Only amateurs behave in that disgusting fashion!' So, after the make-up, on went the little tunic, the kilt, tiny dagger in holster, criss-cross garters over my tights – and placing my beret at a slant on my head, I was all set.

'Good luck, darling,' said Lady Macbeth, leaning over me with a whiff of April

Violets perfume. The long black wig and red velvet dress had transformed her from the Mummy I knew into a stranger. Her hands, pale with wet-white and bejewelled, flitted across my firmly cemented wig – and she was gone, leaving me to wait for what seemed a thousand lives before my scene.

The dressing room was silent now. I sat quietly, a cold feeling moving slowly around in the pit of my stomach. The play seemed to last for ever. Actors came and went, were killed or conquered: quick changes happened all over the classroom, costumes flying; and no one seemed to pay me any attention as they passed by in different stages of blood, sweat and concentration. From the stage came my father's voice, strong and passionate. Finally, Wendy, who was playing Lady Macduff, came off dressed as the third witch in full hag make-up and black gown. Tearing off the witch's costume, she revealed a green one underneath. She cleaned off the old hag, did a fast re-make-up, and taking me by the hand led me to the side of the stage.

Standing in the dim light, I let go of Wendy's hand and tried to remember my first line. 'As birds do, Mother.' Yes, that was it. That was all right, then: I knew how to begin, the rest would follow naturally.

Still ringing in my ears were my father's notes, barked at me from the auditorium. 'Don't forget, Foo, *breathe*. More breath is what you want - breathe deeply before you go on stage. Don't dither, stand with your feet firmly and *grip* the stage. Keep your head high, your eyes up, and enter from a distance, go on with *power*.....don't fidget, remember your stock in trade is your voice and your body – don't ever use a gesture if a word will do. And don't chatter in the wings, it takes away your power. Take a deep breath, *relax*, go on and the stage is yours, Foo!'

It was very dark in the wings, very different from when I had happily rehearsed with him in the sunlit room while the company fitted up the set around us. It was very different too from going over my lines with Jennifer and my mother. This was somehow serious and I did not like it at all. A mere three yards away was the pool of light in which I would soon stand. This pool of light seemed a strange and terrifying thing, a dangerous place. I suddenly felt as if I were stranded on the top of a big dipper – my head hurt, my legs turned to stone, and in my tummy was a cold lump of horrible, sickening fear. I tried to remember my father's words. I tried to breathe deeply, but my fear now turned to undeniable panic. Every line spoken on stage brought my cue nearer and nearer. Escape was the only solution. I had to go, and I had to go now, before it was too late.

We were standing stage right, but I knew that behind the Big Blue was an exit, and freedom. The Big Blue was an enormous sky-blue cloth that travelled with us, so large that it stretched across the back of the cyclorama and covered a multitude of sins.

Upstage behind the Blue I could see a tiny chink of light stealing through the exit door. Our cue came. Wendy winked at me and went on stage expecting me to follow. I looked once more at the chink of light, I looked at my 'mother' on stage waiting for her son to join her....I could not, my legs would not, I had no choice but to bolt - and bolt I did, behind the Blue, towards the light, and got to the door. It was locked, the latch stiff, I pulled hard....it gave way and I pushed open the door – the sun was blinding, the air was hot, and I was free!

A hand got hold of the scruff of my tunic.

'Don't be such a bloody little fool!' Macbeth roared. 'Get on that stage!' He picked me up and threw me on, where I landed at the feet of my by now panicking 'mother'. She looked at me with undisguised relief and asked sweetly, 'And how will you live?' 'As birds do, Mother,' I croaked, as if nothing had happened. My wig was firmly in place, secure and professional – but I've been running towards that chink of light ever since.

*Oh, Geoffrey, you are getting thinner and stiffer.....a husk of a person. The only movement is your arm, which sometimes moves up to your nose and down again beside you. Up and down, up and down.*

'Up and down, up and down, I will lead them up and down.' Puck was the first big part I played, the year I was twelve, when we visited Mount Herman School.

Mount Herman was a favourite date for all of the company. We reached the hill station of Darjeeling by the night train from Calcutta to Siliguri in the foothills. Then we changed on to a narrow-gauge 'toy train' that looped and twisted its way round the hillside, and slowly chuntered to Darjeeling at 4000 feet. By now it would be late in the afternoon of the second day, and memories of the hot, sticky plains would melt away at the smell of pine trees, and the sight of the Himalayas and the ever present mist on the hillside.

The school sat on the side of a steep hill overlooking the Himalayas and the border with Tibet. It was my favourite Loreto convent: the teachers were jolly and the pupils noisy. We lived in teachers' rooms, small and prettily furnished, with chintzy curtains, rugs, big armchairs and flowered eiderdowns on the beds. Small fires burned in the tiny Victorian fireplaces during the winter, and the view of gleaming white snow-caps in the sun was breathtaking.

*Do you remember any of this?*

*The small hall at Mount Herman where we did the shows on a tiny wooden stage with a tatty green front curtain? The evening snacks with the headmaster and his wife, ravenous actors eating her home-made cakes late into the night?*

My childhood was landmarked by treats of this kind: a cup of hot chocolate or a Chinese meal was something very special. Living as we did in hotels or guest-houses, meals were provided, with no choice, and spending our limited resources on food of any kind except the odd peanut or snack was frowned on by Geoffrey.

Here, if I was very good, I would be included on a company trip for lunch at the Mount Everest Hotel. Then I could walk up Observatory Hill for a browse in the Bata shoe shop and on to the chemist's for toothpaste and liquid paraffin, hairpins and cotton wool. Mother once met Sherpa Tenzing at the chemist's on the mall, and went into swoons of rapture, getting his autograph and embarrassing the daylights out of me.

And it was here that I played Puck, a part Mother had played in England. Geoffrey was adding *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to our repertory of eleven

plays. I was page-boy in *Merchant*, Macduff's son in *Macbeth* (a part I had now mastered) and Lucius in the dreaded *Julius Caesar*. I was also expected to polish the brass and help on fit-ups at the weekend.

It didn't take me long to learn the lines. The prospect of being in a play for more than a few moments was daunting, but as I didn't have a choice I tried not to let it worry me. I helped with the costume making, dyeing tights and cutting out and sewing on green plastic ivy and leaves. My costume was modelled on the one Mother had worn, green body and tights, green make-up and fly-away wig. The wig was an old blonde one, dyed green and sprayed to stand up on end. It made me look like a surprised punk, caught in a gale-force wind, but I was impressed to be following in Mother's footsteps.

I had been rehearsed for weeks in between shows and school. I took the day off school and, after helping to fit up the small Mount Herman stage, started to get ready for the show. I was told how to make up: a green face with fly away eyebrows. My hands had to be made up too. I squeezed my little round body into my costume. My chest was still flat as a pancake, to my disappointment, so I looked like a boy.

I decided to go through my lines. My first line was....my first line was.....I couldn't remember! I went over to Mother, who was turning herself into Hermia. 'What's my first line?' I croaked, heart thumping.

'Don't go through your lines before you go on or you'll panic and forget them,' she said. 'Now calm down. You'll know every word.'

It was all very well for Mother to be calm; she was always calm. I was in a blind panic. Puck had eight entrances, from different sides of the stage, and I could not for the life of me remember them in order. Desperation gave me an idea. I got out my battered copy of *The Complete Works* and wrote out on separate pieces of paper each and every cue, followed by the first line, then the exit, then the following cue, first line and so on. I pinned the relevant bit of paper at each entrance. By now I was hot and sweaty and my green face was gradually dripping off, to reveal a glowing pink, but at least I could face the next two hours; there was a fighting chance that I would be in the right place at the right time and not disgrace myself by being 'off' or 'drying up.'

The show went well. After the first few minutes I began to relax and even began to enjoy myself. By the last line of the play, Puck's 'And Robin shall restore amends', I was a hardened pro.

No fuss was made of my early effort (nor any mention made of my DIY prompt system) and I didn't expect any. But that experience may have had a lasting effect. To this day impromptu speaking in public fills me with terror, and I am never happy in a part until I know what is coming next.

So now I was nearly twelve, and a working member of the company. My initiation had been painful, but I had done it. I had not let anybody down. Soon after this I was given the part of young Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice* – and then I found out how to make people laugh.

End of Episode 10