

White Cargo 16

Felicity – Foo – came to England, found it very small and different, and felt very out of place. She was staying with her mother's sister, Beula, in the house where she was born, near Solihull. Geoffrey sent unkind letters from India, as he suffered from what he saw as her betrayal of him and his dream – first Jennifer, and now Foo. He was also depressed at the lack of bookings, but cheered up when he arranged a tour to Hong Kong and Japan, nagging Felicity to join them.

Felicity's film, Shakespeare Wallah, finally opened in London, and was a huge success, and Ismail Merchant, the film's producer, got her an agent, Robin Fox, so her career in England could now begin.

Episode 16

Soon I was going up to London every week to meet directors and casting agents. Finally the news I had been longing for arrived. I had got an audition. In a panic I rang Geoffrey for advice.

The line to Bombay was crackly, and Geoffrey was a bit deaf, so I had to shout.

'It's impossible to advise you. I never did auditions. If it wasn't obvious who was good I wouldn't try! Now listen, we plan to come to England, unless you decide to come to Hong Kong. We are off to Assam,' he continued, oblivious to my anguish. 'Still going strong, even at our age.'

This didn't help me in my hour of need. I comforted myself that he was like this because he wanted me back to tour Hong Kong for no money, then went upstairs to practise.

I got myself to St Martin's Lane an hour early and parked myself at a Kardomah coffee house to wait. At last it was time to go to the theatre.

'What are you going to give us?' said a disembodied voice from the stalls. I told him. 'Oh, well, start when you're ready,' was the weary reply.

So I did. I was into the second half of Ophelia's 'mad speech': 'I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died'. I was acting madly, using the stress as fuel. It was going well; I was convincing; I was on my way.....

'Thank you. Would you jump ahead to the last piece? Thank you.'

Gosh, I thought, I'm so good he doesn't need to see the rest. I launched with gusto into Saint Joan's speech before she is taken off to be burned. My mother used to make me cry when she did this part, and I learnt it by listening to her. 'Light your fire,' I bellowed, my voice straining into a squeal.

'Can you come to the end, please?' The voice in the darkness was tired, and not the slightest bit impressed. The grim truth descended on me like a bucket of icy water. I was to stop. I was not good. I was to go away and not bother this tired man any more.

I was in a state of shock. Back in Elmhurst I shared my traumatic day with Beula. I ate so much of her loving comfort, sausage and mash, apple pie and cream, that I had to change into something loose. Not for the first time I was desperately homesick.

I had no one to talk to who knew how to help me. I had been so know-it-all

with my parents before I came to England, scorning their offers of help as to how to go about getting a job and dismissing them as old-fashioned and out of touch.

I was to go through many more painful hours yet, squeaking my way through auditions on the stages of London. Mother wrote to me with words of comfort and wisdom:

Darling Fu,
Sweetheart, I've told you...auditions are terrible. Don't get downhearted. There is terrific competition in England and you will have to learn to cope. Now cheer up, you're only nineteen, there's plenty of time. You have done amazingly well so far.

This last comment is a bit bewildering. I hadn't done a thing – but unlike Geoffrey, Mother was always positive. And at the time I seized on her words gratefully.

Darling, the play opened last night to good reviews. I wish you could see it. I play the part as Mother would have done, or at least I try to. Oh, I wish you could speak to me. I want to talk to you about this play, and about The Seagull, which starts rehearsing next week.

You liked me best in the classics. Long frocks, wigs, large emotions – those pleased you.

I am so tired, and I won't be able to see you much for the next few weeks, rehearsing and playing at the same time.

Throughout my first Christmas in England I was miserable. Letters came from Bombay, describing their plans: it would be turkey as usual, and the imported Christmas pudding. The children would miss me, Jennifer wrote, and it wasn't going to be any fun without me doing the tree. Shashi had planned to get Jennifer a 5-carat diamond, but she wanted a flat instead. She phoned me on Christmas Day. 'Darling, you must not get so low. You will get work, and when you get a job you must *catch*.' She had made my day with just one small word: *when*. Not *if*. It will be all right, I thought.

On Boxing Day I got a call from Geoffrey. 'Are you bloody well coming or not?'

This anger came as a surprise. I reacted without thinking. 'No, I'm not bloody coming. Why did you go and book a tour with me when I told you not to?' I had stood up to his bellowing all my life.

'This is a damn good tour. Don't bloody let me down now.'

'I'm not coming,' I said calmly. 'Can I say hello to Mummy?'

The phone went dead. A feeling of utter loneliness swept over me. Why were my parents so odd? Why couldn't they let me go? Why was my father so selfish and cruel? Self-pity washed over me and I sat on the floor feeling very sorry for myself.

The day after New Year a letter arrived. By then I was beginning to hate my father. No one here was put to work at thirteen, I thought. No one here was without a home; no one here was expected to devote their life to the family firm. And on top of that he didn't love me anyway, I concluded. I was only important to him now that Jennifer was gone.

I was bitter, and Mother's letter did not alter my opinion:

Darling,

I am reading and re-reading your letters about Japan. You are quite wrong, you know. Daddy literally cries when he reads your letters, Fu. Then he goes into the bathroom and blows his nose...then comes out and pretends he's angry with you for not coming to Japan.

You understand him, don't you? He really does love you, Fu. And he can't help but wonder if you're all right.

In Hong Kong, the Kendals, as they now called themselves – Shakespeareana was dropped when I left, for a reason I never found out – met up with Ralph Pixton, our one-time tea-planter actor, who was now practically running Radio Hong Kong. He had booked some shows for them, and offered them his flat to stay in.

They worked Hong Kong, left on another tour of Borneo, and went on to Malaysia, and all the while letters came flying back to me in England: loving, funny, upset, encouraging, complaining. The umbilical cord was stretched but not cut. I did not want complete separation, and these letters were a lifeline to me.

Some of Mother's letters detail Geoffrey's upset. He had started drinking again, always a sure sign of distress with him:

Darling Fu,

Daddy had promised not to sit and booze all day with Ralph – who can drink all day long and it doesn't affect him – but it has a disastrous effect on your papa ...he KNOWS he's being such a fooland it makes him snore! He has promised to pull his socks up.

Geoffrey obviously didn't keep his promise for very long, as her next letter outlined one of their most absurd conflicts:

Oh, dear, do you know what I've done? Last night your dear papa was snoring again and making the most unbearable noises. Well, I took a pillow and gave him the wallopings great WHACK I could muster! He's never been quite so shaken. I then FIRMLY stated that I'd had quite enough of this and was going to ask Jane to arrange an air passage for me as soon as possible. That did it. He's been wonderful ever since!

Today I had to mend the pillow. I'd burst the stuffing all over the place.

I was down to my last nineteen pounds, when out of the blue I got a phone call from Shashi from his film location in Uganda. The line was terrible, but I managed to grasp that he was sending over two thousand pounds to me in Englan. 'For you to use whenever you want.' He asked me to put the rest in the bank so that Jennifer could have access to it whenever she visited me. My guardian angel had stepped in. I continued to try for films, plays, and television. Then, at last, I got my first job. It was a small part in a television series. I played a Greek Cypriot waitress in a long dark wig and no shoes. I had to slink about and do a lot of sweeping and eyeing up of the Greek boy in love with the leading lady. I only had three lines, and I ended up dancing forlornly on the kitchen table for some reason I forget.

But it was a job, and to my great relief, all the actors behaved in the same

easy way as our company in India. If only I could get another job, and then another, I would be all right.

When Robin Fox, my agent and my rock in a sea of uncertainty for the next few years, asked me if I could ride a motorbike, I instantly replied, 'Yes, of course.' And so I went to see the producer of a television play called *The Mayfly and the Frog*, a two-hander starring John Gielgud. I was hired, on condition that, in addition to riding a motorbike, I also went blonde and lost half a stone.

My answer to Robin had not been strictly true. I had not, to the best of my recollection, ever been on a motorbike. Elephants, camels and horses, yes, even the odd water-buffalo. So within a week I was out on a country road being taught to ride a great black beast of a thing. Soon I got the hang of it. The one problem being that when I stopped the bike was too heavy and if there was no one to hold it I had to leap off before it fell on top of me. In the end in the filming one of the electricians had to support it out of shot.

I was in awe of Sir John for the first two days. After that his glorious sense of humour and relaxed concentration on the work put us all at ease.

The voice of the butler was played by Timothy Bateson, who was the subject of one of Sir John's treasured indiscretions. We were standing in line at the BBC canteen. Sir John turned to Timothy, who was standing behind him. 'Timmy,' he said. 'Are you really going to do the voice like that? It's not terribly good.'

Timmy and I looked at each other in horror, and then burst into giggles. Sir John's *faux pas* were collector's items. It was nice to have one of our own.

By the time I met my son Charley's father I had done three televisions and was cast in another. The play was half an hour long: a young couple meet for lunch, apparently on a date, but she is actually there to tell him she is going to marry his father.

I remember nothing about the job except meeting my leading man. He was dressed in blue denim to complement his tan, his blond hair and his blue eyes. He was hip, and cool, and of the moment, and his name was Drewe Henley.

I had been in England just under two years and was still a green girl, and I went quite weak-kneed whenever he turned on his charm. I was sad to say goodbye when the work was over, but I had discovered that he was married, and my morals were made in India.

My next job took me on tour, and a few months later I got a message in Brighton that Drewe was coming to see me the next day. He turned up looking thin, and told me he was leaving home and getting a divorce, we would be together, and that was that. Then he drove back to London, and I went to the theatre to perform the matinee.

Eighteen months later we were married.

My dear Foo,

Tell me about your TV and what of your husband.

Is he going to live idle? Can the buggler cook? I'd like to have enough money to come to Europe and buy a car.....It's almost impossible to get a decent drink in India any more.

My salaams to the husband man.

Love. G.

We were married at the Chelsea Register Office, a stone's throw from our flat. I was stunned by the whole affair and not in the slightest bit ready for the responsibilities of joining my life to that of another.

My parents sent me a telegram:

WHO CHOOSETH THEE SHALL GET AS MUCH AS HE DESERVES!
LOVE, SHAKESPEARE WALLAHS.

Hardly encouraging!

End of Episode 16