

Chapter X: Christmas; the lure of the theatre; the Wembley Exhibition – and back to Australia, on the 'Esperance Bay'; first meeting with Edgar Deacon

Although Geoffrey and I were of an age when our generation should have been most interested in sex, we seemed not to have any interest in 'that sort of thing' at all; that went for my school companions too. We thought boys rather stupid and a waste of time – we had far more interesting things to do in our spare time. I liked going for long walks over the Cotswolds with Geoffrey, or reading books such as *Life Everlasting* by Marie Corelli, which seemed to predict as much of the future as H G Wells's work.

From early October to the New Year we had 'big business' to attend to. Our parents must have smiled together. We would seriously approach them and ask to be advanced our pocket money until Christmas – it came to very little, not more than three shillings each, if that. We then settled down to work out our commitments for the period. For instance, I would put aside my church collection for the number of weeks, plus the school magazine, etc. We each put aside fivepence halfpenny for Christmas cards and the remainder was the amount we could spend on presents for the five members of the family. I also had to remember a birthday present for both Mother and Geoffrey.

Going to and from school, we both kept a very sharp look out in Boots for the first day they had Christmas cards for sale. One lot were always fivepence halfpenny for a dozen and if you got in early you could get good value for your money. We would dash in and both buy a dozen. Our parents said that, outside our family, we were not to try to give anyone presents but we were to give cards to all our relations, friends and others who gave us presents. For several evenings we planned out our cards and each wrote in 12 cards from us both. Mother was always writing to those relations who lived outside Cheltenham so we put our card in with her letter; we delivered to those who lived in Cheltenham on Christmas Eve, by hand.

We had the most wonderful parties at Christmas and both our parents entered into the spirit of it all. Our young friends' party was especially enjoyable and always ended with charades. The whole party was planned beforehand and by finishing with charades it could go on until the last guest had been picked up by parents. Looking back on the concerts Geoffrey and I gave, they were really quite good – no two years were the same.

Among Geoffrey's school friends there was a rather small boy for his age. He had a very unusual mind and to my sorrow I can only remember his Christian name because I feel sure that, like the boy at Miss Lowther's school in Bristol, he was giving something to the world. Eric was an only child and, therefore, just loved to be with our family whenever he could. For some reason he thought I was a most wonderful person in every way, particularly at acting. Although he was only 12 he had written a French play. (This, as it happened, left me cold as I am no good at languages.) After having been to one of our parties, he decided he must have a party and begged me to go. As it happened, I did not go to the party with Geoffrey as I had gone to see 'Jane Eyre' at the pictures.

I must pause here to explain that a year or so before, on a day when I had been extra sort of clumsy, Father had remarked that I was more like an elephant than a fairy. When I came in from school next day, David had looked up at me and sang 'Hello, Jumbo!' and from then on the men of the family all called me 'Jum' (short for Jumbo). And that is what Eric called me. When he asked his mother if Jum could come to the party she asked 'Who's Jum?' and he answered 'Waite's sister'. She imagined a tomboy of about five years old and so invited a little girl about that age to be company for Jum!

When I arrived at Eric's house his mother opened the door to me. When I explained who I was the poor woman nearly had a fit at being confronted by a golden-haired flapper in her party frock! She explained what had happened and, after showing me an empty room with a number of young boys having great fun sliding about on hassocks, she took me off and tried to entertain me herself. She mostly told me about her life: how her husband's work took him away from home so much and she had a companion to keep her company; how really lonely her life was, etc. (This was not the first time that someone had told me of their private life and hopes, etc. I seemd to be the kind of person who, although I talk, I can listen – and keep confidences.)

In the same way as after the 1939 war there was a surge of drama and touring companies, so after the 1914 war there was a surge of Shakespeare and a revival of plays like 'The Bells', etc. Each year the Shakespearean Company came to Cheltenham for a week and did a couple of matinées and a different play each night. Alas, I am ashamed that I can only remember two names – Dorothy Green and Balliol Holloway. I would go once with the school for the fun of being with my friends, but for the rest of the time I went in 'the gods' – very much cheaper. I would have saved some of my Christmas money for this week. I remember one year I took my father to see 'Henry IV. Part 1' for his birthday treat! My love for the theatre, Shakespeare particularly, started me on a queer sort of hobby which ended in my becoming a great student of humanity.

On my way to and from school I always hoped to see one of the actors in the street. Of course, I had to realize how different they would look in everyday dress and no make-up. The last year I was at school, the brother of one of my father's swimming club friends apparently fell heavily for me. He was older than I was and was content to come to the house to tea sometimes and to work little treats for me. I was unaware of this, but my parents realized and were much too clever to let me know what was happening. He worked in the Municipal Offices and in the evenings he was in the office of the theatre. Discovering my love for the theatre, most weeks he gave us passes and two of us would go. So now I had people to look for every week and, if possible, on a Sunday morning I would take the younger children to the station (David loved trains anyway) to see if the Company was moving off to their next town.

Our 'rich' Uncle Harry, who gave me my teddy bear, would send all his sister's children ten shillings at Christmas. Mother would give Geoffrey and me our ten shillings and what a time we had with that with other money given us at Christmas. After weeks of trying to spin out our few pence we did not waste any of this windfall. There was one combined *must*. Tickets for the pantomime – the best – the front row of the stalls; then there would be the programme and some of the best sweets. For these we went to the best sweet shop and, for once, chose our favourites and not those that went the furthest. On the day, we wore our best party clothes and Geoffrey would have the tickets, sweets, and programme money and escort me correctly. We hoped to be recognized by some of the cast because of the St Martin's party.

There was special edition of the classics I was saving for – they cost one shilling and threepence each – so I would try to buy one of those.

The Australian Government was always asking my father to bring his family back to WA. They would pay the fare and would also raise his pension. By 1924 the cost of living had risen so much that the family income was barely above the poverty line. The seas were now clear of mines and my parents began muttering about returning to WA, particularly as my father had been promised his old job back. Geoffrey and I said, 'Why not?' The pension department was not interested in paying our fare now but my father didn't worry. He knew that when he took the money he would get for the house out to WA the exchange would pay the fares for all six of us, which it did. He also received his war gratuity.

It was the year of the Wembley Exhibition. My parents went up to the opening and booked passages on one of the new Bay liners which had been built especially to bring Australians to the Exhibition.

Some time in the summer term, even before I sat for the Oxford, Miss Miles sent for me. I should mention here that my scholarship period had been up for some time but Miss Miles applied each year for the annual one (free place). It appears that in those days scholarships always expired *before* the examinations and, if a pupil didn't have what it took, they just left and that was that.

In 1920, when the Education department thought up the scheme for my particular free place, they didn't realize that in 1924 they would have far more teacher students than they needed. Consequently, they had asked the head teachers to try and channel the students into other careers. Miss Miles didn't explain this to me at first. When she asked me if I would like to be a nurse I replied 'I wouldn't like the blood!' (It wasn't the blood so much I was thinking about as *bed pans*!) She then said she meant training to be a nursery nurse but I still was not interested. I then explained that we were thinking of going back to WA and, as I would not now be going on to the teachers' college, my mother was coming in to see her about paying for my education. She replied that there was no need for that – the Education Department was quite happy to foot the bill! So everyone was happy! Incidentally my Oxford Standard made it possible for me to teach straight away in WA, up country.

My last term at school was very bittersweet. The breaking up of the way of life I loved... This seemed to happen so often in my life. The parting of school friends – the first time in my life that I had been at a school long enough to really make any. In my form most of the girls called me 'Fanny', having realized that Fanny was short for Frances. I had, at last, persuaded the family to drop the 'y' from Fairy and call me 'Fair'. I had hoped they would call me by my second name – Mary – which would have saved a great deal of trouble for me, but no, they wouldn't.

On the last day of term, 14 years ago, Barbara Pigott (who all her life had been at the same school, Pates) and I met with our mutual friend, Marjorie Birket (one of the English mistresses) in her flat. We never all three met together again.

Mr Daniels gave Geoffrey and me one pound each to buy a gift from him. Geoffrey bought a microscope. I finally bought a thin-leafed Bible with gold edges, bound in rich brown leather. I had a small Bible which had been given to me before I could read, but I had always wanted one of those very fine-leafed ones.

We travelled up to London very early the day before we sailed so that we could go to the Wembley Exhibition. Geoffrey and I saw only a fraction of the things we would have liked to see.

To please Mother, I went on board without putting my hair up. It was a little bit of snob value for Mother to have a daughter of eighteen and a half years with her hair still down her back – it meant she was still a schoolgirl. The next day I struggled to put up the thick, heavy wavy mass. I made two ungainly earphones but the pins would not keep them up. It was the fashion on board to wear coloured nets of thick silk and I crammed my earphones into a red one for months.

The 'Esperance Bay', one of the new Bay liner boats built especially for Wembley visitors, was a sturdy, smooth little boat of 12,000 tons, I think. For the only time in my life I wasn't sea sick. We had never been on such a well appointed ship with all sports and entertainments laid on – writing rooms, a library, the lot. After all, it was 10 years since we had been on a ship. The day we reached Colombo I had serious tummy trouble so I still couldn't go in a rickshaw. Oil got into the food and a large number of people were ill: the worst were put into hospital, among them myself.

By the time we reached the coast of Western Australia I was quite well and on deck, watching the white, sandy frill at the edge of the blue ocean come nearer and nearer. By my side stood a young man who certainly didn't look 27 – Edgar George Deacon. Neither of us thought, or had the slightest idea, that within five years we would be married and have a wonderful companionship and many adventures of all kinds together for 40 years.