



Chapter Five pages 68 - 76

'I know exactly what Cinderella felt like,' said Maia to Miss Minton.

It was the night before the twins and Mrs Carter were going to Manaus to see the opening of Little Lord Fauntleroy. They had bought dresses at Fleurette's — white and frilled, with pink curly embroidery so that they looked rather like wedding cakes. The little maid, Tapi's sister, had been sent back three times to the steamy laundry to iron the flounces to perfection, hair ribbons were chosen and tossed to one side, bracelets slipped on and off.

'We need some proper jewellery,' said Beatrice crossly. 'Maia could lend me her mother's pearls.'

'And what about me?' complained Gwendolyn. 'I'm not going to sit there while you wear Maia's pearls and not me.'

They weren't satisfied with the way their white shoes had been cleaned — they wriggled and complained as the hot curling tongs crimped their ringlets into shape...

In the morning, as the boat waited, it was even worse.

'Where's my purse? Maia, you find it; it was on my bed.'

'We must have some scent, Mama. Proper scent — not lavender water, that's for babies.'

As Maia helped them she felt completely unreal; she was so certain that at the last minute Mrs Carter would relent and let her at least come to Manaus with them.

'I know I can't come to the play, but I could wait and see Clovis afterwards,' she had begged.

'Now, Maia, don't be foolish; as though I would allow you to hang about the theatre like a common beggar.'

But at last the girls' hair was safely netted against the breeze, and the maids, looking as sullen as Maia had ever seen them, fetched their shoe bags and their cloaks.

As the boat drew away, Tapi standing beside Maia said clearly, 'As Pestinhas.'

Maia looked at her, startled. She must have heard wrong, but when she looked the words up in the dictionary they meant what she had thought they meant.

'Pigs', Tapi had called the twins. 'Nasty little pigs.'

It was very quiet when the noise of the boat had died away, and Maia no longer tried to hide her misery.

'It's not the end of the world,' Miss Minton had said the night before. 'We'll have a good day exploring. They can't lock us in the house.'

But when Maia went to find her, she found the governess still in her room sitting in her one upright chair. She was very pale and her eyes were closed.

'I'm just coming. I've got a little headache, but it will be gone in a minute.'

'No, you haven't,' said Maia. 'You've got a proper migraine. My mother had them and they're awful. You just have to lie down till they're over. Have you got aspirin?'

'Yes, but there's no need to make a fuss.'

But when Miss Minton tried to get up there was a blind look in her eyes, and she gave up and let Maia turn down the bed.

'I'll be fine,' said Maia. 'I'll go and read on the veranda.'

But though the book was David Copperfield and she'd got to the part where Betsy Trotwood was chasing the donkeys out of her garden, she couldn't concentrate. She kept seeing Clovis' face and hearing him say, 'You will come, Maia, won't you? You will be there?'

After a while she went along to Minty's room and very quietly opened the door. Miss Minton was fast asleep in the darkened room, and Maia knew she would not wake for a long time.

She went into her own room. On her work table was the map she had got from Mr Carter. She picked it up and studied it. She had managed to push back the heavy bolt on the door to the compound at the back several days ago. According to the map there was a path running from the back of the house along the water channels which eventually came out behind the docks in Manaus. The channels themselves were as tangled as boa constrictors, but if she kept the sun on her right... Today there really was some sun, not only the dark rain that fell so often.

It was only ten o'clock. The play didn't begin till two o'clock. Even if it took her a long time, she should still get there — and at least she would have tried.

She changed into walking shoes and buttoned her purse into the pocket of her dress.

Then slowly, carefully, she pulled back the bolt.

She had looked at the Indian huts so often from her window that it was strange to be walking past them. The little rootling pig was there, tethered, and a few chickens, but the Indians were all away, working in the forest or the house.

The beginning of the path was exactly where it should have been, with a narrow plank over the stream it followed. Maia plunged into the forest.

Away from the compound, the great trees grew more thickly; dappled creepers wound round the trunks searching for the light; a scarlet orchid, hanging from a branch, glowed like a jewel in a shaft of sun.

'Oh, but it is beautiful!' she said aloud, and drew the damp, earthy, slightly rotten smell into her lungs.

But it was a mistake to be so rapt about the beauty of nature because the path was not quite as simple as it had appeared on the map. She knew she had to keep the sun on her right; but the sun could not be relied upon: sometimes the canopy of leaves was so dense that she seemed to be walking in twilight. And the streams kept branching... She stayed beside the widest of them, but the path made by the rubber-gatherers was overgrown; she stumbled over roots of trees, trod on strange fungi, orange and mauve... Sometimes a smaller stream cut across her path and she had to jump it or paddle. Once something ran through the trees ahead of her, a grey snuffling creature...

She couldn't have told the exact moment at which she knew she was lost. First there was just doubt, as she took one path rather than another. Then doubt became fear and fear became panic, and she had to take deep breaths to stop herself from crying out. At the same time the clouds began to cover the sun. Even those rays of light she had had to steer by had gone.

They're right, the beastly Carters; the jungle is our enemy, she thought. Why didn't I listen?

She would have done anything to be back in the gloomy bungalow eating tinned beetroot and being glared at by the twins. Trying to pull herself together, she walked faster. The stream she was following was quite big; a river really and the current was fast: it must lead to Manaus.

Blinking away tears, she trudged on. Then her foot caught in a liana, a long branch hanging like a rope from the top of a tree, and she fell.

It was a heavy fall; her foot was trapped — and in putting out her hand to save herself she had clutched a branch of thorns. Furious with herself, hurt, lost, she lay for a few moments helpless.

When she sat up again something strange had happened. The stream by which she had fallen disappeared behind her in a curtain of green; more than a curtain, a wall of reeds and creepers and half-submerged trees. Yet from this green barrier there had appeared a canoe, coming towards her silently like a boat in a dream.

The canoe was being poled by an Indian boy who stood in the prow and was steering it in an unhurried, easy way so that the water seemed scarcely to be disturbed.

Maia watched for a moment, not quite believing what she saw; then she stumbled to her feet.

'Please can you help me?' she shouted, stupidly in English, then desperately in her few words of Portuguese.

The boy looked at her; he seemed surprised by her look of agitation. Then he brought the canoe silently alongside. Still he did not speak.

'I have to get to Manaus. I have to,' Maia said, and pointed to where she thought the city was. 'Manaus is there?'

The boy smiled, and suddenly he seemed just a boy of about her own age; not a mysterious and possibly threatening stranger, emerged from a curtain of green.

He shook his head. 'Manaus,' he said, and pointed almost in the opposite direction.

She was utterly crestfallen. So much for her map, her understanding of the jungle — and her hand was bleeding.

'I have to get to Manaus. I promised a friend... amigo... I have to...' she repeated. What little Portuguese she had learned seemed to have gone from her. She could only look at him and entreat.

The boy did not answer. He was dressed in the work clothes worn by the local Indians: a blue cotton shirt faded from washing and cotton trousers — but round his head he wore a broad band which partly covered his thick, coal-black hair, and a pattern of red zigzags was painted on his cheekbones. His skin was a light bronze and his eyes the same colour as Maia's own, a deep dark brown.

For a moment he stood upright in the canoe, thinking. Then he stretched out his hand and made a movement of his head which was unmistakable. She was to get into the canoe.

'Will you take me? Oh will you!'

She did not know if he understood, but her instinct was to trust him. As he pulled her into the canoe, she winced and he looked down at her hand. Then he took out a big thorn embedded in her palm and she thanked him.

'Sit,' he said in Portuguese.

He took the pole and the boat moved with surprising speed down the river. As soon as they were under way, she thought what an idiot she had been. He would hit her on the head... he would take her off to his tribe as a slave... or worse...

I am thinking like the Carters, Maia told herself.

The boy had stowed the pole now and was using a paddle. She moved to take the other one but he shook his head, pointing to her injured hand. As he pulled on the paddle, she saw on the inside of his wrist a small, red mark, like a four-leafed clover. A good luck sign? The mark of his tribe?

But even this sign of his foreignness couldn't frighten her for long. He moved so gracefully; he was so quiet and companionable. She was an idiot to trust him but she did.

'Thank you,' she said — in English, in Portuguese. She even remembered the word for 'thank you' in the Indian language that the servants spoke. 'I have to go to the theatre. The Teatra Amazonas.'

He nodded and they glided on down the river. Sometimes they moved between lush green trees which leant so far over the water that she felt as though they were travelling between the roots of the forest. Birds rose as they went past: scarlet ibis, white herons flapping in slow motion... As they took a side branch of the river, Maia cried out because the boy was steering between gigantic leaves from which piebald frogs flopped into the water.

'That's the Victoria Regia lily, isn't it?' she said. 'I've read about it.'

It was difficult to believe that he did not understand her; he had such a listening face.

Then in an instant the worst happened. The boy gave a wild shout; a shout of pure rage. He put down the paddle, threw himself on top of her, pressing her down against the floorboards of the boat, and kept her there pinioned. She felt his breath on her cheek.

Then he released her and pointed. They had passed underneath a wicked-looking branch with spikes the size of knives. If he hadn't forced her down Maia would have been knocked unconscious or even blinded. As he clambered back and picked up the paddle, he was still muttering furiously in his own language and glaring at her. Without deciphering a single word, she knew he was scolding her for her carelessness, trying to explain that one had to be alert the whole time in the jungle.

'Idiota!' he said finally, and though Senhor and Senhora Olvidares in the phrase book had not used the word, Maia understood it well enough.

She was very careful after that, keeping a proper look-out, but nothing could quite quell her delight in the beauty she saw about her. It was as though she was taking the journey she had imagined on top of the library ladder the day she heard about her new life.

Then the stream became wider, the current stronger, and she caught a glimpse of low, colour-washed houses and heard a dog bark.

'Manaus,' he said. He drew up to the bank and helped her out. She took out her purse but he wouldn't take her money, nor would he listen to her thanks. 'Teatra Amazonas,' he said, pointing straight ahead.

He would go no further towards civilization.

The boy watched her as she ran off. She looked back once and waved but he had already turned the boat.

He poled swiftly back through the maze of waterways. When he reached the place where he had found Maia, he smiled and half shook his head. Then he set the canoe hard at the curtain of green and vanished into his secret world.