

M e s o p o t a m i a

a stage play

by

Robert Myers

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Characters

Gertrude-Oriental Secretary of Iraq

Faisal-King of Iraq

Ghallal-Gertrude's assistant

Sir Percy-Civil Commissioner of Iraq

Kinahan-Faisal's attachè

Sayid Talib-An Iraqi politician

Madame Talib-Sayid's wife

Ghazi-Faisal's son

The set is a unit set: the office of the Oriental Secretary of Iraq, Gertrude Bell, and the adjoining garden overlooking the Tigris River in central Baghdad. The scenes in the play take place in the early 1920s.

Earlier versions of the play were read at Pegasus Players Theatre in Chicago in 2005 and at the New York Theatre Workshop in New York in 2007. In New York, the role of Gertrude Bell was read by Janet Zarish, and the reading was directed by Christopher Grabowski. The play was also read at Theatre Row in New York in 2009, produced by the New Group, directed by Ian Morgan, with Kathleen Chalfant reading the role of Gertrude Bell. It was presented in a workshop production in conjunction with the gallery exhibit "Gertrude Bell in Mesopotamia" at the Whitney Humanities Center at Yale University in 2011, with Kathleen Chalfant as Gertrude Bell, directed by Evan Yionoulis.

PROLOGUE

(GERTRUDE, as a beautiful girl of seven, stands at the edge of a precipice in the mist in the north of England, holding the hand of her father, who is unseen, as they look down at the boats below them)

GERTRUDE

(Reciting)

When the breeze of a joyful dawn blew free
In the silken sail of infancy,
The tide of time flow'd back with me,
The forward-flowing tide of time;
And many a sheeny summer-morn,
Adown the Tigris I was borne,
By Baghdad's shrines of fretted gold,
High-walled gardens green and old;
True Mussulman was I and sworn,
For it was in the golden prime
Of good Haroun Alraschid.

(Pause, speaking to her father)

Who is Haroun Alraschid, father?

(Pause)

Was he really a good king?

(Pause)

Maybe we can go... together... to Baghdad... when I'm grown up.

(Pause)

We can sail up the Tigris and climb the walls of the palace garden.

(Pause)

You can build us a boat and we'll travel together from Newcastle. Look at them, father! So many ships. I wonder where they're all going.

ACT ONE

Scene One

(CALL TO PRAYER SUNG BY VARIOUS MUEZZIN IN DIFFERENT MOSQUES, NONE OF THEM IN SYNCHRONY, REPEAT AND ECHO IN VARIOUS DIRECTIONS. SOFT MORNING LIGHT RISES on the interior of a spacious colonial office in Baghdad. The whitewashed walls are covered with several enormous maps and lined by black bookcases decorated with exquisite Oriental vases and stuffed full of files, newspapers, intelligence reports and leather-bound literary tomes. Persian rugs are spread out on the floor, and in the center of the room are a writing table and chair, another larger map table, and facing them several white cotton chairs decorated with bits of brocade. On the writing table are a black and gold telephone, a glass of water and a small bottle of pills. In one corner is a hat rack on which hang several extravagant women's hats. Stripes of light pour through the blinds. THE VARIOUS CALLS TO PRAYER SLOWLY FADE. On the verandah, overlooking the garden just outside the office, VOICES CAN BE HEARD. GERTRUDE, who is standing on a stool, her back to the audience, is drawing a line on an enormous map of Mesopotamia, apparently oblivious to the GENERAL HUB-BUB just outside the window. She is wearing an elegant, ankle-length dress, and her hair, which contains a couple of streaks of gray, is neatly gathered into a bun on top of her head. She is slightly stooped, but buzzing with energy, and moves with the self-assured air of a patrician. Enter GHALLAL, a handsome young man with a clipped moustache. In one hand he carries a tray with demitasses, saucers and a long-handled copper kettle of Turkish coffee, and in the other several Arabic-language newspapers)

GERTRUDE

(Comparing the map to a photo she holds
in her hand)

Who do we have this morning, Ghallal?

GHALLAL

(Places the tray and papers on her desk)

Izzat Pasha wishes to give *Khatoun* a piece of his mind
about mixed-sex schools.

GERTRUDE

I hope it's a small piece. He has so little to spare. Tell
him I'll see him after my meeting with Sayid Talib.

GHALLAL

The secretary of Abdel Khodary is also waiting to receive
your reply to his invitation.

(He hands her a card)

GERTRUDE

(Still on the stool, reading)

"I humbly request the presence of Your Highness..."

(Speaking)

I've been promoted, Ghallal.

(Reading)

"...Madame Gertrude Belle..."

(Speaking)

Belle with a 'e.' He obviously doesn't speak French.

(Speaking)

Are these the textile merchant Khodarys?

GHALLAL

He is a partner in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company.

GERTRUDE

In that case, tell him I'll attend if I can rustle up some
regal attire.

GHALLAL

There is also a Madame Najib who wishes to speak to
Khatoun about her husband.

GERTRUDE

Who is her husband?

GHALLAL

He is a prisoner of the British, taken to India during the war. She is critically ill and desires to see her husband one last time before she dies.

GERTRUDE

Did she reveal the nature of her illness?

GHALLAL

No, but she says she has mere minutes to live.

GERTRUDE

Tell her I'll see her after Izzat Pasha... if she doesn't expire in the interval.

GHALLAL

(As he pours her coffee, looking at the bottle of pills on the desk)

Khatoun has not taken her medication.

GERTRUDE

(She steps down from the stool and places the photograph on the desk)

I've been too busy drawing borders.

(He looks at the photograph)

Do you recognize it? It's an aerial survey...

(He turns the photograph around, obviously befuddled by the angle. She turns the photograph for him)

A bird's-eye view... from above. I flew over every inch between Baghdad and Basrah.

(He looks at her startled)

In an aeroplane. Did you think I meant a carpet or a broom?

GHALLAL

Khatoun was not frightened?

GERTRUDE

Terrified, for the first fifteen minutes. It was worse than standing on an icy ledge in the Bernese Alps in the middle of a blizzard, clinging to my guide's *lederhosen* for dear life. Then I found I rather liked it.

GHALLAL

What can you see from up there?

GERTRUDE

I saw... the walls of Uruk built by Gilgamesh, the Great Deluge flooding Kish, the first wheeled chariot racing through Ur, the serpent in the Garden of Eden, the Code of Hammurabi on slabs of stone, Hadrian's legions retreating from the East, equestrian hordes pouring in from Arabia, Harun al Rashid wooing Zubaida in their palace in Baghdad.

GHALLAL

(Looking at the photograph)

You saw all that from an aeroplane?

GERTRUDE

(Returns to her mapmaking)

You're quite literal, aren't you, Ghallal? When Al Mutanabbi writes "*Al lail w'al khail w'al beida ta'rafuni*" ["the night and the steed and the desert know me"] does he mean the night and the horse and the desert really know him?

GHALLAL

Al Mutanabbi is an intellectual.

(She looks at him. Tries to correct himself)

He is Iraq's greatest poet. Everyone reveres him.

(She continues looking. He stumbles on)

As they do *Khatoun*. She is the most cultured woman in Baghdad.

GERTRUDE

That puts me in a rather select group.

GHALLAL

(Continues looking at the photograph)

Can you see the *mudhifs* in the marshes from the aeroplane? My cousin Amin owns a *mudhif* in Amara that is bigger than the Al Adham mosque in Baghdad.

GERTRUDE

You can. They look like replicas of the Paris arcades, woven with reeds.

GHALLAL

Would *Khatoun* like to visit Amin's lodge? She would have to sleep on a straw mat.

GERTRUDE

I can make myself comfortable almost anywhere as long as I have a good novel and my collapsible bathtub from Harrod's.

GHALLAL

We can take my Uncle Haji's *mashshuf* from Kubaish. Has *Khatoun* ever ridden in a *mashshuf*?

GERTRUDE

I've been twice around the world in every conveyance from rickshaw to pachyderm, but I'm ashamed to admit I've never set foot in a *mashshuf*.

GHALLAL

My mother will make *Khatoun* her special recipe, water buffalo milk with fish balls.

GERTRUDE

Fish balls? That sounds... distinctive.

(She turns and looks at the map. SAYID TALIB—dark eyes, an extravagant moustache, 40ish—appears in the doorway. Beside him is his wife, MADAME TALIB, dressed in a brightly-colored *abbaya* and headscarf)

GHALLAL

When would *Khatoun* like to visit?

GERTRUDE

As soon as I finish the borders of Mesopotamia.

GHALLAL

(Seeing SAYID at the door)

Sayid Talib has arrived.

GERTRUDE

(Turning)

And he's brought Madame Talib with him. Come in. Welcome.

(To GHALLAL)

More coffee for the Talibs, Ghallal. And some oranges.

(GHALLAL exits)

Sit down, please. How is your father, the *Naqib*?

(They sit)

SAYID

He is well, thanks God. He asked after *Khatoun's* health.

GERTRUDE

Give him my regards. Tell him I'm fine, *thanks* to modern medicine. How are things in Najaf?

SAYID

The situation on the Euphrates is not good, *Khatoun*.

GERTRUDE

What are the notables exercised about now?

SAYID

They are enraged by the secret agreement.

GERTRUDE

Secret agreement?

SAYID

Between you and the French. To steal our oil from Mosul.

GERTRUDE

Where did they get an idea like that?

SAYID

(Pointing to the papers)

The newspapers published the details of the conspiracy.

GERTRUDE

Ah, you mean the meeting at San Remo? That's not a conspiracy, Sayid. Those are preliminary discussions.

(GHALLAL re-enters with a tray containing coffee, oranges and sesame bread)

SAYID

Preliminary discussions with precise percentages. According to *Al Istiklal*, eighty percent goes to you and twenty for the French.

GERTRUDE

It's amazing how quickly unsubstantiated rumor becomes established fact in this country.

SAYID

It is a fact that the British still rule our country.

GERTRUDE

We have been granted a provisional mandate, although we are entirely dependent upon public servants like yourself, Sayid.

(GHALLAL pours the coffee)

Sugar, Madame Talib?

(MADAME TALIB places her hand over the cup)

Let me peel you an orange. I picked them myself in Baquba.

SAYID

Imams of both sects wish to know what has happened to the British promise of independence.

GERTRUDE

We gave them, and everyone else, independence the moment we marched into Baghdad.

SAYID

Independence is not given, *Khatoun*. It is taken.

GERTRUDE

What would they like us to do, simply pull up our stakes and allow the Turks to return?

SAYID

They wish to know how long is provisional, *Khatoun*.

GERTRUDE

Provisional is... as long as it takes to create a state.

SAYID

They are also quite confused about the meaning of 'mandate.'

GERTRUDE

The confusion is one of translation. The papers intentionally chose a word for 'mandate' with extremely negative connotations.

SAYID

What is the correct meaning of 'mandate,' *Khatoun*?

GERTRUDE

'Mandate' means... to administer... to... take care of something that belongs to someone else.

SAYID

So the British are *caring* for our oil?

GERTRUDE

We are acting as... guardians...

SAYID

...by giving twenty percent to the French.

GERTRUDE

His Majesty's Government is providing tutelage on an interim basis under the auspices of the League of Nations.

(Picks up a stack of magazines)

We must be boring your poor wife to tears.

(To MADAME TALIB)

Would you like to glance at the latest fashions, Madame Talib? These just arrived from my stepmother in Newcastle. I find them uninspired, but what do I know about *haute couture*? I spent the last decade living in a tent.

SAYID

Khatoun is too modest. She is the most elegant Western woman I have ever met.

GERTRUDE

That's exactly what Ibn Saud said when we met in Basra. Then I found out I was the *only* Western woman he'd ever met.

SAYID

Khatoun's family builds ships. Her father is the owner of the largest steel mill in Britain.

GERTRUDE

Second largest.

SAYID

She was sent here with the British army during the war to help us create our country after they leave.

GERTRUDE

When I arrived in Baghdad, there was one hospital, two feet of mud, no sanitation and people were so hungry they were eating seeds instead of planting them. The Turks had destroyed everything.

SAYID

Khatoun speaks five languages in addition to Arabic.

GERTRUDE

Six.

SAYID

She is a friend to every *sheikh* in Iraq, she has excavated all our ancient cities, and she knows the Syrian desert like the back of her hand.

MADAME TALIB

It seems she knows the Arabs better than the Arabs.

GERTRUDE

In tribal societies someone has to maintain the big picture.

SAYID

But unlike Colonel Lawrence, she does not dress in tribal attire.

MADAME TALIB

How do you dress when you go exploring in the desert?

GERTRUDE

Much as I am dressed now.

MADAME TALIB

And the Bedouins are not startled to see a Western woman riding a camel across the horizon?

GERTRUDE

Half the time they don't know I'm a woman, unless I tell them. In this part of the world, men wear dresses too.

(TO SAYID)

Tell me, Sayid, what is it these notables in Najaf are demanding?

SAYID

They insist on selecting their own leader.

GERTRUDE

Do they have someone picked out?

SAYID

(A suitable pause)

Many of them begged me to consider the position.

GERTRUDE

You'd be an ideal candidate, but you come from a tiny clan in Basrah, and, of course, the Shi'a would never support you.

SAYID

The Shi'a love me, even though I'm Sunni. But they are completely unreliable.

(SAYID gestures for GHALLAL to pour him more coffee)

GERTRUDE

You've put your finger on our dilemma. The Sunni are a minority in Mesopotamia, and the Shi'a have no suitable leaders.

(GHALLAL pours the coffee)

SAYID

The Shi'a are *khiffah*, treacherous, like a woman. They are born assassins. Look at how they treated their own founder. They invited him to Iraq and then slaughtered him like a lamb.

(GHALLAL keeps pouring and the coffee spills onto SAYID'S hand)

SAYID

Ooww!

GHALLAL

Excuse me.

GERTRUDE

I'm terribly sorry.

(She hands him her napkin)

SAYID

(He wipes his hand. To GHALLAL)

You should be more careful.

GERTRUDE

Do you think the current agitation is indigenous?

(SAYID doesn't understand. Looks to

MADAME TALIB, which GERTRUDE sees)

WaTani. Baladi.[indigenous, from this country]

SAYID

These people are all Iraqis, *Khatoun*.

GERTRUDE

Sir Percy's certain our problems emanate from outside. He thinks agitators from Syria are coming across the borders to stir up trouble.

SAYID

Then *Khatoun* must draw us better borders.

GERTRUDE

Tell me, Sayid, how many men have you slaughtered like a lamb?

SAYID

Me? I'm harmless as a kitten. You can ask my wife.

GERTRUDE

Fifty?

SAYID

I don't recall the precise number. But not so many as the British killed each day during the war.

GERTRUDE

I read in your file that before we arrived you extorted every merchant in Basrah. If they didn't pay, you cut their throats.

SAYID

Are you sure you were not reading *The Arabian Nights, Khatoun*?

GERTRUDE

According to my reports, you lived with a band of rogues who murdered all of your political opponents.

SAYID

You must mean the Democratic Club of Basrah. We never lifted a finger against anyone.

(GHALLAL exits with an empty tray)

GERTRUDE

(To MADAME TALIB)

Did any of the fashions catch your eye, Madame Talib?

MADAME TALIB

Shall I say the truth?

GERTRUDE

Of course.

MADAME TALIB

They are... quite ugly.

SAYID

Maya!

MADAME TALIB

The dresses are drab and poorly designed.

SAYID

You must forgive my wife's tongue.

MADAME TALIB

I prefer the low necklines of the French and the boldness with which their women wear them.

GERTRUDE

I find her opinions fascinating.

MADAME TALIB

And, unfortunately, the British women are very homely.

SAYID

She also speaks this way to her mother-in-law, which is why they do not speak at all.

MADAME TALIB

I do not speak to your mother because she talks to me like a servant. Even your own daughters despise her.

SAYID

They despise her because you have turned them against her.

MADAME TALIB

You can not turn children against their grandmother, unless she is a beast.

(To GERTRUDE)

One's children are excellent judges of character. Don't you agree?

GERTRUDE

I wouldn't know.

MADAME TALIB

Your children can not recognize a monster?

GERTRUDE

I have no children.

MADAME TALIB

(As if someone has died)

I am sorry.

(A pause)

Why not?

GERTRUDE

In the West, as in the East, it's customary to first find a husband.

MADAME TALIB

You have no husband either? How sad.

GERTRUDE

It could be sadder. I could be married to a murderer.

(Enter GHALLAL. SIR PERCY, dressed impeccably in a khaki military uniform, enters right behind him)

GHALLAL

Sir Cokus has arrived, *Khatoun*.

SIR PERCY

Sayid! Good to see you.

SAYID

This is my wife. Sir Cokus is the commander of our country.

SIR PERCY

Provisional administrator, Sayid. Don't go giving me a promotion. It's an honor to meet you, Madame Talib.

(To SAYID)

Your father is well?

SAYID

Yes, he is, thanks God.

(SIR PERCY glances at the map)

GERTRUDE

Sayid has just returned from a nationalist party meeting in Najaf.

SIR PERCY

How are things along the Euphrates?

SAYID

Extremely unsettled, Sir Percy.

SIR PERCY

Who's stoking the fires, Sayid?

SAYID

Mullahs of both faiths are furious about the theft of our oil.

(He eyes GHALLAL)

I tried to appeal for calm, but the leaders are demanding immediate *jihad*.

SIR PERCY

They're openly calling for insurrection?

SAYID

It pains me to say so.

SIR PERCY

Who are the principle agitators?

SAYID

The wolves leading the pack are... Jafar Pasha... Amir al Sadr... and *Shaikh* Abu Hasan.

MADAME TALIB

(Jumping in)

Why do you pay my husband to spy for you? Just ask him what you want to know. Like all the Arabs, he will tell you for free.

GERTRUDE

We don't pay your husband, Madame Talib. He is a member of the interim government. He receives a salary.

MADAME TALIB

A very substantial salary for minister of the interior.

SAYID

Which buys substantial rings for your fingers.

MADAME TALIB

And more substantial ones for your mistresses. Tell me, Miss Bell, why don't you just go yourself and sit in the coffeehouses and ask people why they hate the British?

SAYID

Women don't go to coffeehouses in Baghdad, Maya.

MADAME TALIB

She rides through the desert mistaken for a man. Why not go in disguise to the coffeehouses? Or to the baths?

GERTRUDE

It's a bit more difficult to go to the baths in disguise.

MADAME TALIB

My sisters and I go every Wednesday. With the *women*.

SAYID

Khatoun is not interested in a gaggle of geese who prattle about their husbands' mistresses.

MADAME TALIB

I'm sure our conversations are more intelligent than the ones the men have in the coffeehouses while sucking on *argilehs* and spitting out seeds.

GERTRUDE

You and your daughters must come to Sitt Cox's tea party next week. The most interesting women in Baghdad will be there.

MADAME TALIB

Will they be discussing the oil deal in Mosul, or only the necklines in Paris and the oranges in Baquba?

SAYID

I'm afraid we must be leaving.

GERTRUDE

Please don't rush off, Sayid.

MADAME TALIB

Unfortunately we have an appointment for lunch, with his mother.

(MADAME TALIB gestures to SAYID. They rise to leave)

GERTRUDE

Please give her my regards.

(GHALLAL shows them out the door. SIR PERCY examines the map)

SIR PERCY

Sayid appears to have met his match. What do you make of his admonitions?

GERTRUDE

I'd take them with a grain of salt... about the size of Madame Talib's diamonds.

SIR PERCY

His reports are usually quite reliable.

GERTRUDE

When it suits his purposes.

SIR PERCY

What else did he say about these agitators on the Euphrates?

GERTRUDE

They're set on a native Arab ruler.

SIR PERCY

Do they have an actual Arab picked out?

GERTRUDE

Sayid does. Himself.

SIR PERCY

We could do worse.

GERTRUDE

It might be difficult now that Genghis Khan is dead.

SIR PERCY

Let's not exaggerate, Miss Bell.

GERTRUDE

He's a thug.

SIR PERCY

That he is. And as his wife just demonstrated, he's also quite adept at following instructions.

GERTRUDE

You can't be serious.

SIR PERCY

If we opt for a native figleaf, we don't have a lot good of choices.

GERTRUDE

What about the pledge we made to the Sharif of Mecca?

SIR PERCY

Don't tell me you believe in the mirage of Arab nationalism you and Colonel Lawrence cooked in Cairo.

GERTRUDE

We promised these people a genuine leader.

SIR PERCY

As you know, Arabs do what their *sheikhs* tell them to, and their *sheikhs* support whoever gives them the biggest *bakshish*.

GERTRUDE

Sayid is correct about one thing, Sir Percy. They want us gone.

SIR PERCY

The Turks and their friends in Syria want us gone. Because we threw them out.

GERTRUDE

When we threw them out, we were liberators.

SIR PERCY

I'm aware of your opinions on the subject.

GERTRUDE

You're suggesting I shouldn't have opinions?

SIR PERCY

I'm suggesting if you disagree with my policies you should say so to my face instead writing letters to your friends in London.

GERTRUDE

I simply pointed out that Syria has not collapsed under a real Arab ruler. The streetcars are still running in Damascus.

SIR PERCY

Apparently your friend Faisal is doing more than maintaining the trams.

(He shows her a telegram)

This arrived from our A.P.O in Mosul. He says Jamil Beg, a colonel in the old regime, just crossed into Kurdistan from Syria with a large raiding party.

GERTRUDE

(Looking at the telegram)

My bet is it's banditry.

SIR PERCY

They have a machine gun and two artillery pieces.

GERTRUDE

The road from Mosul to Aleppo has been a favorite of thieves for a thousand years.

SIR PERCY

I think they have their eye on our garrison in Tel Afar. I've been trying to raise General Haldane all morning.

GERTRUDE

He sent me a note saying he's en route to Persia.

SIR PERCY

Persia?

GERTRUDE

He's meeting with Colonel Salmond of the RAF, but the real reason is he can't stand the heat in Baghdad.

SIR PERCY

We're on the verge of an insurrection and our commander has gone on holiday?

GERTRUDE

This isn't an insurrection.

SIR PERCY

It certainly has the earmarks of one.

GERTRUDE

Sayid is lying, Sir Percy. He's trying to frighten us into thinking the country's coming unraveled, so we'll turn to him.

SIR PERCY

Perhaps he is. But something very nasty is brewing in Mesopotamia, Miss Bell. I can smell it.

(He exits)

GHALLAL

Izzat Pasha is still waiting to give *Khatoun* a piece of his mind.

GERTRUDE

If he'll wait five minutes, he can give me the entire organ.

GHALLAL

What would you like me to tell Madame Najib?

GERTRUDE

Madame Najib?

(Trying to remember who she is)

Oh, yes, the prisoner's wife. Tell her... I'm relieved to hear she hasn't expired. I'll see her right after Izzat Pasha.

(GERTRUDE inspects the map)

GHALLAL

Khatoun has still not swallowed her pills.

GERTRUDE

(Examining the map)

I'll take them as soon as I finish drawing this border.

(GHALLAL exits. GERTRUDE compares the map to the photo in her hand and carefully draws a line)

Scene Two

(THE SOUND OF A SINGLE OUD PLAYING A MOURNFUL TUNE. A warm summer evening one week later. THE BRILLIANT LIGHT OF DUSK is refracted through the desert haze. Downstage, across the Tigris, one can see the silhouettes of date palms, minarets and several estates built on the opposite bank of the river. LIGHTS UP on the garden beside Gertrude's office, which is decorated with an ornate fountain and planted with citrus trees from whose branches hang cages containing nightingales and other singing birds. Several tables with chairs have been placed in the garden for the ladies' tea organized by Sir Percy's wife, *Sitt Cox*. The party has just ended, and COLONEL KINAHAN CORNWALLIS, tall and thin, impeccably dressed in a short-sleeve summer uniform, sits at a table upstage. He is reading an Arabic newspaper. SOUND OF FEMALE VOICES SPEAKING ARABIC OFF. After a minute or so, GERTRUDE enters, wearing the most outlandish of the hats seen on the hat rack in her office in the previous scene: a hair band with a spray of feathers sticking straight up like an Aztec warrior)

GERTRUDE

Colonel Cornwallis!

KINAHAN

You look ravishing, Miss Bell.

(He kisses her hand. She sits)

GERTRUDE

What brings you to Baghdad?

KINAHAN

I was in Arabia, giving Ibn Saud a geography lesson. He's decided half the Hejaz belongs to him.

GERTRUDE

The Sharif of Mecca can't be pleased with that.

KINAHAN

He was livid, until I explained to Ibn Saud that borders, unlike Bedouins, don't migrate in the dry season.

GERTRUDE

Can I get you a drink?

KINAHAN

I just ordered a gin and tonic.

GERTRUDE

A much better choice than warm darjeeling. You just missed *Sitt Cox's* tea party for the feminine *crème de la crème* of Baghdad.

KINAHAN

Sounds like the social event of the season.

GERTRUDE

(GHALLAL arrives with KINAHAN'S gin and tonic)

I'll have the same, Ghallal.

GHALLAL

Khatoun has eaten nothing all day.

GERTRUDE

Then bring me some olives.

(He waits for her to ask for some more substantial food)

Very *large* olives.

(GHALLAL exits. To KINAHAN)

He's worse than a mother hen.

KINAHAN

He does seem to have taken you under his wing.

GERTRUDE

I'm lucky to have him. He's the best man in Baghdad. How are things in Damascus?

KINAHAN

Not well, I'm afraid.

GERTRUDE

The French and Faisal not getting along?

KINAHAN

When he does what they want, the nationalists say he's a puppet. When he does what the nationalists want, the French threaten to toss him out on his ear.

GERTRUDE

Such a shame. Remember how dashing he looked at Versailles in his black *abaya*, addressing the American delegation in Koranic Arabic. Even seasoned diplomats were mesmerized...

KINAHAN

We helped him create a lovely mirage in Paris...

GERTRUDE

...the picture of an Arab king.

KINAHAN

...then buggered him royally.

GERTRUDE

They're really going to get rid of him?

KINAHAN

The French, unlike the Americans, don't believe in fairy tales, Miss Bell. I hope they don't depose him before I return.

(Enter GHALLAL with the glass of gin and various dishes of food, including lamb kebab)

GERTRUDE

I had no idea it was so dire.

(GHALLAL begins to serve the food)

See how he spoils me. I ask for olives, and he brings me the feast of Belshazzar.

GHALLAL

Sir Cokus desires a word with *Khatoun*.

GERTRUDE

Tell him I'm talking to Colonel Cornwallis.

GHALLAL

He asked me to convey that it is an important matter.

GERTRUDE

I'll be up in a minute.

(GHALLAL finishes serving and exits. She
raises her glass to KINAHAN)

Cheers!

KINAHAN

Cheers!

GERTRUDE

I miss our times in Cairo, Colonel. We were quite a
crew, weren't we? A brilliant constellation..

KINAHAN

More like a menagerie.

GERTRUDE

...all in love with the East.

KINAHAN

You know Lawrence has now become a full-fledged
celebrity. He was last seen sneaking into his own show
at the Albert Hall.

GERTRUDE

I wonder what his fans would do if they found out he's
four-foot eleven. When I first met him at a dig at
Carchemish, he looked like a little boy in short pants
lost among the Hittite ruins.

KINAHAN

Probably spying on the Germans building the railroad
to Medina.

GERTRUDE

He wasn't much of an archaeologist.

KINAHAN

None of us was, except for you. You more than held
your own with the men, Miss Bell, even in the Savoy
bar.

GERTRUDE

All I needed to be completely equal was my own foreign service wife.

KINAHAN

I hear you've had your own problems here, too.

GERTRUDE

Some of the *mullahs* in Najaf are quite incensed about San Remo.

KINAHAN

I thought it was more serious than that.

GERTRUDE

We've also had several infiltrations in the north. Officers of the old regime crossing into Kurdistan.

KINAHAN

My sources say Sir Percy thinks it's all being directed out of Damascus.

GERTRUDE

I told him that's nonsense. Sayid Talib has convinced him we're on the verge of an insurrection.

KINAHAN

He's still on our payroll?

GERTRUDE

He's the minister of interior. But he's angling to be the first president.

KINAHAN

You're considering elections?

GERTRUDE

Sir Percy thinks he may need a native façade. He finds Sayid... pliable.

KINAHAN

It *is* difficult to imagine anything Sayid wouldn't do.

GERTRUDE

(A pause)

Perhaps we should consider Faisal.

KINAHAN

Faisal?

GERTRUDE

He'd be perfect for the part.

KINAHAN

He's still the King of Syria, Miss Bell.

GERTRUDE

As you said, that role's about to end. And we did promise his father we'd make him the king of an Arab country.

KINAHAN

You're suggesting we simply switch to Mesopotamia?

GERTRUDE

The nationalists are clamoring for native rule. Why not give them a native?

KINAHAN

Faisal's no more a native here than you or I.

GERTRUDE

His father *is* the Sharif of Mecca.

KINAHAN

For the time being. Until Ibn Saud throws him out of Arabia.

GERTRUDE

It would buy us support from the Kurds and the Sunni.

KINAHAN

I doubt Faisal's anxious to embark on another fiasco after Syria. Perhaps we should wait until he's actually toppled.

GERTRUDE

Mention it to him, see what he says. You could come as his adviser.

KINAHAN

What does Haldane think... about this insurgency talk?

GERTRUDE

He's in Persia. Discussing Churchill's plan to police Mesopotamia with aeroplanes.

KINAHAN

It's a serious strategy?

GERTRUDE

We're under pressure from Parliament to cut costs.

(Enter GHALLAL)

GHALLAL

Sir Cokus wishes a word with *Khatoun*. He says the matter is urgent.

GERTRUDE

Tell him I'll be right up.

GHALLAL

Khatoun did not like the food I brought her?

GERTRUDE

(Pops an olive in her mouth)

I'm eating an olive. See.

(Holding up her glass)

We'll have two more gins and tonic.

(GHALLAL exits)

KINAHAN

Perhaps you should see what Sir Percy wants, Miss Bell.

GERTRUDE

May I ask you a question, Colonel? Why, after knowing each other for a decade, do you insist on calling me Miss Bell?

KINAHAN

Because if I called you by your first name, then you might start calling me by mine.

GERTRUDE

Kinahan? Is that such a troubling prospect? I could just call you Ken.

KINAHAN

The real reason is because... Gertrude sounds odd to me.

GERTRUDE

Odd?

KINAHAN

Gertrude is... my wife's name.

GERTRUDE

I knew you were married. I didn't know she was also a Gertrude.

KINAHAN

She's not the perfect foreign service wife you were dreaming of in Cairo.

GERTRUDE

That's why we never caught a glimpse of her.

KINAHAN

She lives in Hampshire with the children. We're divorcing in August. Have you ever been married?

GERTRUDE

Never. Well, once, many years ago. To a much older man... I was three.

KINAHAN

Who was the lucky groom?

GERTRUDE

My father. We had a great deal in common. We were both mourning the same woman... my mother.

KINAHAN

A union based on grief? Sounds rather gloomy.

GERTRUDE

I was never happier. For once I had him all to myself. Every afternoon he'd let me sit in his lap, and together we'd watch the ships leave Newcastle and he'd read Tennyson to me.

KINAHAN

Things also ended badly for you?

GERTRUDE

He took another wife... Florence, my stepmother... when I was eight.

KINAHAN

He was foolish to let you slip away.

GERTRUDE

Fortunately, Florence is very Eastern about it. She doesn't mind sharing him, as long as it's epistolary. We write each other almost every day.

(Enter GHALLAL, carrying more drinks)

GHALLAL

Sir Cokus wishes to see *Khatoun* immediately.

GERTRUDE

Tell him I'll be right up.

(Enter SIR PERCY, a telegram in his hand)

SIR PERCY

That won't be necessary. I came down.

GERTRUDE

Get Sir Percy a drink, Ghallal.

SIR PERCY

I didn't come for cocktails, Miss Bell.

GERTRUDE

Is there a problem?

SIR PERCY

You recall our conversation about Jamil Beg?

GERTRUDE

Of course.

SIR PERCY

I finally reached Haldane yesterday and insisted he reinforce our garrison at Tel Afar. A squad of armoured cars arrived this afternoon. Late, as it turns out. Our A.P.O., Captain Stuart, had been shot in the head and his two assistants killed by a bomb.

GERTRUDE

What dreadful news.

SIR PERCY

The P.O., Major Barlow, was captured by Jamil Beg's thugs, but he managed to escape. This just came in over the wire.

(Hands GERTRUDE the telegram)

He made a dash for it to warn the reinforcements. They gunned him down, then ambushed the armoured cars. The entire company was killed.

GERTRUDE

(Looking at the telegram)

How ghastly... I'm reeling... I never imagined...

SIR PERCY

Jamil Beg apparently didn't infiltrate into Kurdistan to rob people along the Aleppo Road.

GERTRUDE

We still don't know if this is part of an organized uprising.

SIR PERCY

We do know sixteen British soldiers are dead in Tel Afar.

GERTRUDE

Who could have foreseen this?

SIR PERCY

I foresaw it.

GERTRUDE

Have more troops been sent in?

SIR PERCY

I ordered in a column myself since our commander is in Persia on holiday.

KINAHAN

Miss Bell said he was there discussing our new air strategy.

SIR PERCY

I can't imagine why she'd mention that to you, Colonel, except for the fact that she's a blethering windbag.

GERTRUDE

That's quite unfair, Sir Percy.

SIR PERCY

We're not talking about letters to London or idle chit-chat at a ladies' tea, Miss Bell. Men's lives are at stake.

GERTRUDE

I share confidences so my sources will share theirs. That's how intelligence is gathered in the East.

SIR PERCY

You're apparently in need of some new sources.

KINAHAN

(Looking at the telegram)

Haldane will certainly be returning to Baghdad when he sees this.

SIR PERCY

Maybe you should ask Miss Bell about that.

KINAHAN

Miss Bell?

SIR PERCY

She's been in contact with him since he left. I just informed him of this hideous slaughter and asked why he hadn't returned to Baghdad. Do you know what he told me? He said Miss Bell had written him a note assuring him the chances of an insurgency were nil.

GERTRUDE

I don't recall saying that.

SIR PERCY

I'm not surprised considering the amount of 'intelligence gathering' that goes on in your office.

GERTRUDE

I never told him the danger of an uprising had subsided. Never.

SIR PERCY

I'll be sure to include that heartening news in the condolence letters I write to the widows of the men killed at Tel Afar.

(To KINAHAN)

Excuse me, Colonel. I have an insurrection to attend to.

(Exit SIR PERCY)

KINAHAN

He lost his temper.

GERTRUDE

With good reason, I'm afraid.

KINAHAN

It's not your fault. Things were obviously set to explode of their own accord.

GERTRUDE

It's my job to foresee this sort of incident.

KINAHAN

Life can be quite unpredictable here, as we both know. I should be going too.

GERTRUDE

You're leaving?

KINAHAN

I have my own turmoil to attend to in Damascus.

GERTRUDE

Of course.

(KINAHAN exits)

GHALLAL

Khatoun has not eaten her dinner.

GERTRUDE

I've lost my appetite.

GHALLAL

It is not a matter of appetite. Your health requires it.

(He gestures toward the plate of lamb)

Here, try some *kebab*. The meat comes from the lamb of my brother-in-law.

GERTRUDE

I'm not hungry.

GHALLAL

You must eat. You can not take the medication for your nerves when your stomach is empty.

(Pause)

May I ask *Khatoun* a question? What does it mean, 'blethering windbag'?

GERTRUDE

(Pause)

A blethering windbag is... Bring me my pills, Ghallal.

Scene Three

(SOUNDS OF WARFARE--AERIAL BOMBARDMENT, BI-PLANE PROPELLERS, ARTILLERY SHELLS EXPLODING--AND FLASHES OF LIGHT IN EVERY DIRECTION, NOT FAR OFF. Lights up on SIR PERCY. He stands in Gertrude's office, speaking into the telephone. He examines the map as he speaks, his voice rising from time to time with barely concealed fury. GHALLAL stands by the entrance to the office, listening intently)

SIR PERCY

(Into phone)

Dulaim. Just outside Fallujah. They were dressed as native police. Six shots, in the back. This is someone who spoke Arabic like a Bedouin. Treated them as brothers. Somebody smells weakness. They have access to British papers, too, General Haldane. They think we're *withdrawing*.

(Pause)

It's a tactic they learned from the Turks. This is all being orchestrated from the outside.

(Pause)

Who do you think taught them to build trenches, the Bedouins?

(Pause)

We control the pumping station, don't we?

(Pause)

Cut off the water. Then have your *gurkhas* uproot their date trees and throw them in the irrigation ditches. That should get someone's attention.

(Pause)

Forget about talking. Identify the ringleaders, burn down their houses in front of their families. If anyone resists, raze his house too. Have Salmond send in some Vikrams and machine gun the livestock.

(Pause)

No one's suggesting the garrison in Samawah surrender. You still have howitzers, don't you?

(Pause)

Then use one squadron to cover their retreat and the other for Fallujah.

(SAYID and MADAME TALIB enter, unseen by SIR PERCY)

SIR PERCY (Contd)

Ring me back after Salmond sends in the bombers.

(Hangs up)

Bring me another coffee, Ghallal. Two sugars.

GHALLAL

Sayid and Madame Talib have arrived, Sir Percy.

SIR PERCY

(Turns from the map, surprised)

So they have. Bring them coffee, too.

(GHALLAL exits)

SAYID

Khatoun sent a note saying she wished to see me.

SIR PERCY

I'm expecting her any minute.

SAYID

How is the... situation, Sir Percy?

SIR PERCY

The situation stinks to high heavens.

(SAYID, who does not understand, looks at
MADAME TALIB who pinches her nose. SIR PERCY
gestures for them to sit)

When did you get back to Baghdad?

SAYID

We arrived two days before from Ramadi.

SIR PERCY

How are conditions there?

SAYID

Very calm, I am pleased to report. Britain is blessed
to have an ally such as *Sheikh Sulaiman*.

SIR PERCY

We're grateful he's remained steadfast during the
uprising.

SAYID

When your position declines, Sir Cokus, you discover
who your true friends are.

SIR PERCY

What sort of recompense is he expecting for sticking with us?

(SAYID, who does not immediately understand the meaning of 'recompense,' looks at MADAME TALIB. She rubs her thumb and two fingers together)

SAYID

He seeks no economic advantage from your misfortune. His only interest is to rid Iraq of the rebels.

SIR PERCY

We'll double his subsidy. As an act of good faith.

(SAYID glances at MADAME TALIB, who shakes her head slightly)

SAYID

The pressures on him are enormous.

SIR PERCY

How much does he require to withstand them?

SAYID

He was horrified to hear of the brutal murder of Colonel Leachman in Fallujah. With the recent revolt in Samawah, an uprising in Ramadi would be a catastrophe.

SIR PERCY

How much?

(MADAME TALIB blinks slowly four times.

SAYID watches her and holds up four fingers)

Quadruple?

(SAYID nods)

That's two thousand rupees a month. We don't pay anyone that kind of money, Sayid... except you.

SAYID

As you say, *Sheik* Suleiman is a reliable partner.

SIR PERCY

He's got us over a barrel, doesn't he? All right. But if one rifle is raised against us in Ramadi...

SAYID

I will deliver the news.

SIR PERCY

And the subsidy, too, I assume. So you can receive your share.

SAYID

For me, Sir Cokus, virtue is its own reward.

SIR PERCY

The price of virtue has suddenly become quite dear in Iraq, hasn't it? What are you hearing here in Baghdad?

(Enter GHALLAL with the coffee.
EXPLOSIONS continue in the distance)

SAYID

Every day the atmosphere becomes more perilous.

SIR PERCY

Sitt Cox told me when she shops in the souq even the merchants' wives scowl at her.

MADAME TALIB

Perhaps she and Miss Bell should invite them to tea to explain the benefits of the mandate.

SAYID

People are petrified, Sir Cokus. The capital is overrun with fanatics. In Khan Dallah, there is a gang that delivers anonymous notes to rich citizens demanding money. If the merchants refuse to pay, they abduct their children.

(Takes out a piece of paper and hands
it to SIR PERCY)

I have compiled a list.

SIR PERCY

(Looks at the list)

These people are working with the insurgents?

SAYID

They are vicious extremists who must be apprehended. They are extorting honest businessmen

(SOUNDS OF EXPLOSIONS are now louder)

SIR PERCY

Did you manage to make it to the nationalist party meeting last night?

SAYID

I attended in spite of the security situation.

SIR PERCY

What was the reception like to your speech?

SAYID

When I suggested that we should try to resolve our differences with the occupiers peacefully, there were screams of 'traitor' and 'stooge.' But I shouted down all of my opponents.

MADAME TALIB

My husband barks very loudly when others go near his dinner dish.

SAYID

In private, many members expressed support for my position.

SIR PERCY

Did they manage to agree on anything?

SAYID

The mandate must end immediately. And the new *emir* must be an Arab. On these points there can be no flexibility.

SIR PERCY

Were any names put forward?

SAYID

There is much support for the Naqib of Baghdad.

SIR PERCY

He has the *bona fides*, but he's too old.

(GERTRUDE enters and stops at the door)

SIR PERCY

Who else?

SAYID

Now that Faisal has been removed from Syria, his allies are trying to promote him for president here.

SIR PERCY

And you?

SAYID

I think he is a dangerous radical. He is not even an Iraqi.

SIR PERCY

I mean you as a candidate.

SAYID

(He sees GERTRUDE)

As *Khatoun* likes to remind me, I come from a small Sunni clan in Basrah.

SIR PERCY

Miss Bell, you've arrived.

GERTRUDE

Don't mind me.

SIR PERCY

I'm sure we can help you fill in the gaps, Sayid. Find a prominent Kurd to serve with you, a Shi'a or two in lower level spots.

(SAYID looks at MADAME TALIB)

SAYID

I would be free to select my own cabinet?

SIR PERCY

We would retain a veto over foreign relations and finance. It is our money, after all.

SAYID

You would endorse me?

MADAME TALIB

He is afraid of what will happen if people see the strings attached to his fingers.

SIR PERCY

We wouldn't say a word publicly.

MADAME TALIB

That would be the kiss of death.

SIR PERCY

We have to deal with the insurgency first, which has taken quite a nasty turn.

SAYID

I tried to warn *Khatoun* about the anger boiling because of the oil. Stealing is something no Arab can tolerate.

GERTRUDE

I know how seriously you take stealing, Sayid.

SIR PERCY

(To SAYID)

As soon as we get a grip on the situation, Miss Bell and I will arrange for proper elections. It's high time an Arab ran this country.

SAYID

I will consider your offer, Sir Percy.

MADAME TALIB

We must be leaving. Our daughters are graduating from primary school this afternoon.

(She rises to leave)

GERTRUDE

(To MADAME TALIB)

Give them my congratulations. The women at *Sitt Cox's* tea party found your girls enchanting.

MADAME TALIB

I certainly will. I am eager to meet your children, too, Miss Bell.

GERTRUDE

I don't have any children.

MADAME TALIB

Oh, yes, I forgot. You're still hunting for a husband. Good luck.

(SAYID and MADAME TALIB exit)

GERTRUDE

May I ask an impertinent question? When did you decide Sayid Talib was our savior?

SIR PERCY

I gave him no ironclad promise.

GERTRUDE

You certainly insinuated.

SIR PERCY

We need to float the idea of an Arab façade quickly, to take pressure off the military track.

GERTRUDE

Is the news from the field that grim?

SIR PERCY

Haldane just called to say we're in full retreat from Samawah. And now there's this nastiness with Leachman in Fallujah.

GERTRUDE

So the solution is to turn the government over to a gangster?

SIR PERCY

He is cooperative. And we're not handing him the reins of power.

GERTRUDE

The man's a murderer. He lives off extortion.

SIR PERCY

(Hands her the list SAYID gave to him)

He gave me a list of insurgents he said I should apprehend immediately.

GERTRUDE

(Looking at the list)

These are his business competitors. It's like the rogue's gallery of Baghdad. He's trying to induce us to rub out his rivals.

SIR PERCY

He's extorting *us*, to be more precise, Miss Bell.

GERTRUDE

Then why are we supporting him?

SIR PERCY

Because we don't have any good alternatives.

GERTRUDE

Of course we do.

SIR PERCY

Who?

GERTRUDE

Faisal.

SIR PERCY

Faisal, as Sayid pointed out, isn't an Iraqi.

GERTRUDE

He's an Arab, he's available, he has no enemies, and Ken can certainly convince him to serve.

SIR PERCY

There is another drawback. He actually is a nationalist.

GERTRUDE

At least he looks like the leader of a country.

SIR PERCY

He favors our immediate withdrawal.

GERTRUDE

He saw where intransigence got him in Syria.

SIR PERCY

He attacked us from Syria.

GERTRUDE

He can't attack us from Syria if he's in Mesopotamia.

SIR PERCY

He can try to force us out once he's here.

GERTRUDE

How long do you think he'd last without British backing? He'd be like us, an interloper. Let's be blunt, Sir Percy. Parliament has no stomach for more British casualties, and the taxpayers have no patience for a protracted insurrection. It's true Mr. Churchill is drooling over all this oil for his beloved navy, but he insists we get it for him on the cheap. Which is why we're trying to subdue fifty thousand angry tribesmen with a few dozen armoured cars, three brigades of *ghurkas* and a couple of squadrons of Vikram bombers. It makes for a wonderful show, but if the *sheikhs* get a whiff of what's going on backstage, the curtain will come down rather quickly. Sayid knows precisely how weak we are because he's the one who's paying off our enemies. The moment we give him one whit of real power, he'll call our bluff, and we'll have to withdraw.

SIR PERCY

So you're suggesting we simply bring Faisal here and put him on the throne?

GERTRUDE

Ken and I know how to handle him. He trusts us.

SIR PERCY

What about Sayid? When he discovers he's been duped, he'll be furious.

GERTRUDE

We could wait until he does something outrageous and then simply remove him from the scene.

SIR PERCY

And in the meantime?

GERTRUDE

I'll put out the word to everyone I know that the British choice for president is... Sayid Talib.

SIR PERCY

I owe you an apology, Miss Bell.

GERTRUDE

For what?

SIR PERCY

For the... 'windbag' crack.

GERTRUDE

It's true. I talk too much.

SIR PERCY

But some of it makes a great deal of sense.

(PHONE RINGS. GHALLAL hands the phone to
SIR PERCY)

SIR PERCY

(Into the phone)

Hello.

(Pause)

They did? That's splendid news, General Haldane.

(Pause)

Yes. Hit them again, immediately, with everything
we've got.

(LIGHTS FADE. SOUNDS OF SWOOPING PLANES
AND FIERCE AERIAL BOMBARDMENT FROM ALL
DIRECTIONS)

Scene Four

(SOUNDS OF BOMBARDMENT CONTINUE AS LIGHTS FADE. In the evening sky, stars and a crescent moon appear. BOMBARDMENT SOUNDS FADE, REPLACED BY FISHERMEN CASTING THEIR NETS INTO THE TIGRIS AND THE SOUND OF BUZZING INSECTS. GERTRUDE sits at her desk writing. GHALLAL enters with a glass of lemonade on a tray)

GHALLAL

When will he be arriving, *Khatoun*?

GERTRUDE

(Looking at her watch)

By my calculation, he should be here... twelve hours ago.

GHALLAL

Trains in Iraq are very slow.

GERTRUDE

They're especially slow when they pull off on a siding and sit for six hours.

GHALLAL

Emir Faisal's train is not moving?

GERTRUDE

I pray it's moving now. When we arrived at the station this morning, we received word his train was late, so Sir Percy telegraphed Colonel Cornwallis and told him to delay their arrival until this evening to avoid the midday heat.

GHALLAL

In summer, Baghdad is quite warm at noon.

GERTRUDE

In summer, Baghdad is quite warm at every hour. I came here straight from the station, and I've been working all afternoon on this guest list for *Faisal's* reception. This lemonade is delicious.

GHALLAL

(Opening the box on the tray)

I have brought *Khatoun* something special from Amin's.

GERTRUDE

Who is Amin?

GHALLAL

(Offering her a sweet from the box)

Amin is the best baker in Baghdad. It is *namoura*.

GERTRUDE

I can't even think about food in this heat, Ghallal.

GHALLAL

Khatoun can not take her medication with an empty stomach.

GERTRUDE

I'm so pleased about the arrival of Faisal and Colonel Cornwallis that I've completely forgotten about my medication.

GHALLAL

You must eat a *namoura*. It is a special occasion. Last night my wife gave birth.

GERTRUDE

In that case, of course I will. Congratulations!

(She takes a sweet)

Was it a boy or girl?

GHALLAL

A girl. Everyone says she looks like me.

GERTRUDE

What is her name?

GHALLAL

Jamila. It is my mother's name.

GERTRUDE

Tell your wife I congratulate her on Jamila's arrival. This is delicious.

GHALLAL

Where is the *emir's* train now?

GERTRUDE

I hope it's arrived at the station. Sir Percy went back an hour ago. I would've gone too, but I have this list to do.

GHALLAL

(Looking at the list on the table)

It is a long list.

GERTRUDE

A very long list. I want to be sure Faisal meets everyone in Baghdad.

GHALLAL

Tell me, *Khatoun*, what kind of king is Amir Faisal?

GERTRUDE

He's tall and slender, with a perfect profile. He glides about in his *abaya* with a look of infinite weariness, which is quite common among the Bedouins. He is, in a word, enchanting.

GHALLAL

Do you think he will like Iraq?

GERTRUDE

That depends a great deal on whether the Iraqis like him. Do you think they will?

GHALLAL

I do not know. I have never met him.

GERTRUDE

Do you think your family will support him?

GHALLAL

They know nothing about him, *Khatoun*. He is from Arabia.

GERTRUDE

Surely they can be persuaded to support him. His father is the Sharif of Mecca.

GHALLAL

Mecca means very little to us, *Khatoun*. We make our pilgrimage to Najaf.

GERTRUDE

Colonel Cornwallis and I arranged speaking stops for Faisal all along the Euphrates. I'm certain when they meet him, they'll change their minds.

GHALLAL

In Kubaish we have no *amirs*.

GERTRUDE

Yes. I forgot. You're frighteningly democratic in the marshes.

GHALLAL

Does *Khatoun* still wish to visit my cousin's lodge in Amara? Uncle Haji is waiting to take her in his *mashshuf* for the feast of my mother's fish balls.

(CAR DOORS CLOSING OFF)

GERTRUDE

Oh, yes... I forgot... the fish balls...

(A DOOR OPENING OFF, FOOTSTEPS AND VOICES)

That's them!

(After a moment KINAHAN, who looks exhausted, enters)

Ken. How was your trip?

KINAHAN

Extremely long and extremely hot.

GERTRUDE

(To GHALLAL)

Get Colonel Cornwallis a lemonade, Ghallal.

KINAHAN

With a couple of jiggers of gin in it.

GERTRUDE

Put some in mine too.

(GHALLAL exits)

Where is Faisal?

KINAHAN

In the other car with Sir Percy.

GERTRUDE

How was the reception at the station?

KINAHAN

A bit lackluster.

GERTRUDE

There were huge crowds this morning. With horns and signs and Sharifian banners strung across the streets.

KINAHAN

It's a pity Faisal wasn't here to see it.

GERTRUDE

I would've been at the station this evening, but I'm preparing for tomorrow's reception. We're inviting over 300 people.

KINAHAN

Let's hope that cheers him up.

GERTRUDE

The tour didn't go well?

KINAHAN

To put it bluntly, Miss Bell...

GERTRUDE

Gertrude.

KINAHAN

...it was a disaster.

GERTRUDE

I'm stunned. We've been laying the groundwork for weeks. We had half a dozen operatives in Basrah alone.

KINAHAN

There were crowds, but no hint of affection. In Karbala, the response was downright hostile.

(GHALLAL returns with the gin-laced
lemonades)

GERTRUDE

He's such a charming figure. How could they resist him?

KINAHAN

Perhaps they don't want him.

GERTRUDE

Of course they want him. He's the solution to their problems.

KINAHAN

He's the solution to *our* problems.

GERTRUDE

How's he taking it?

KINAHAN

How would you take it? He was deposed, deported and discarded. Then I convinced him people here were clamoring for him, and he arrives and is greeted with scowling crowds and half-empty arenas. This is a man who entered Damascus two years ago to the cheers of ten thousand tribesman at the head of a throng of galloping camels.

GERTRUDE

I can't imagine what went wrong.

KINAHAN

He brought his son Ghazi, so he's trying to put the best face on it, but I assure you he's seething.

GERTRUDE

How have you been... aside from Faisal?

KINAHAN

I have no life aside from Faisal. It's worse than being married.

GERTRUDE

And the other marriage... to the other Gertrude?

KINAHAN

That ended, finally, in December.

GERTRUDE

Congratulations.

KINAHAN

(Raises his glass)

I suppose that is cause for celebration.

(They clink glasses)

GERTRUDE

Give me two weeks, Ken, and I'll have them sitting at Faisal's feet.

KINAHAN

Your first task may be to convince him to stay in Baghdad.

GERTRUDE

It's Sayid.

KINAHAN

What?

GERTRUDE

Sayid. That's why he received such a hostile reception. I bet Sayid threatened every *sheik* in the south.

KINAHAN

You're the one who suggested elections. Perhaps Sayid's under the illusion they're genuine.

GERTRUDE

He thinks we're backing him.

KINAHAN

Backing him?

GERTRUDE

That's what I've been telling everyone.

KINAHAN

If people think we're backing him...

GERTRUDE

...no one will vote for him.

KINAHAN

You could make Machiavelli blush, Gertrude.

GERTRUDE

But if he's figured out why we brought Faisal to Iraq..

KINAHAN

I doubt he thinks we brought him here to show him the Tower of Babel.

GERTRUDE

...we'll have an assassination instead of an inauguration. He'll kill him.

KINAHAN

It certainly wouldn't be his first murder.

(CAR DOOR CLOSING, VOICES OFF. GHALLAL goes to greet the new arrivals.)

GERTRUDE

Here they are.

(She rises. Enter FAISAL, a tall, strikingly handsome man in Bedouin robes. He is followed by SIR PERCY, GHAZI, who is ten years old and dressed in Western clothes, and GHALLAL, who is carrying suitcases)

GERTRUDE

Faisal! And this must be Ghazi. You're more handsome than your father.

(To FAISAL)

We're so happy to have you here.

FAISAL

I'm happy someone is happy to have me, *Khatoun*.

GERTRUDE

Soon everyone will be happy. We're hosting a banquet in your honor tomorrow night, your majesty. Iraq's greatest poet has written you an ode.

KINAHAN

People are lining up to attend.

FAISAL

I thought they wanted me here, *Khatoun*.

GERTRUDE

Of course they want you. It is my job to make sure they want you.

SIR PERCY

The Arabs need an Arab leader, your majesty.

GERTRUDE

(She takes him by the arm)

And you are an irresistible king.

SIR PERCY

Another glass, Ghallal.

(GHALLAL gives him a glass. He raises it)

SIR PERCY

To the arrival of Emir Faisal.

(Glasses are raised in a toast. GHALLAL, the only Iraqi in the group, stands, watching)

ALL

(Except GHALLAL and GHAZI. In unison)

To Faisal!

GERTRUDE

To Iraq!

(Glasses are again raised in a toast)

ALL

(Except GHALLAL and GHAZI. In unison)

To Iraq!

- END OF ACT ONE -

ACT TWO

Scene Five

(Gertrude's office, late morning. She is seated at the map table, stitching a piece of fabric. On the floor in front of her, GHAZI, dressed in a tan linen suit with short pants, knee socks, oxfords and a royal blue tie, is diligently maneuvering a toy train along a circuitous track through a small battalion of lead soldiers. GHALLAL enters carrying a tray with coffee, sesame bread, water and pills. He steps over GHAZI, avoiding the tracks and soldiers)

GERTRUDE

Has Sayid arrived?

GHALLAL

No, but Izzat Pasha wishes to give *Khatoun* another piece of his mind.

GERTRUDE

It's a miracle the man has any gray matter left.
(Accidentally jabs herself with needle)
Ouch! A seamstress I am not.
(She pulls a stitch out and continues sewing)

GHALLAL

I have brought *Khatoun* fresh *kak* from Amin's bakery to eat with her medication.

GERTRUDE

(Not looking up)
Put it on the desk, please.
(She finishes the final stitch and unfurls the fabric, which turns out to be a flag with a crown in the center)
Voilà! What do you think?

GHALLAL

It has... many colors.

GERTRUDE

Three to be exact. Red, green and gold. What about the design?

GHALLAL

I have never seen another banner equal to it.

GERTRUDE

Does that mean you like it?

GHALLAL

What is the object in the middle?

GERTRUDE

A crown. You deftly avoided my question.

GHALLAL

Why does it have a crown?

GERTRUDE

Because my father felt it needed one. What do you think of it?

GHALLAL

What is the crown's purpose?

GERTRUDE

You missed your calling. You should have been a diplomat.

GHALLAL

Khatoun also did not answer my question.

GERTRUDE

I'll answer yours if you'll answer mine. It is the new flag of Iraq.

GHALLAL

Why did your father make the flag of Iraq?

GERTRUDE

Because I have the design skills of a blacksmith. You still haven't told me what you think of it.

GHALLAL

Why did your father feel it should have a crown?

GERTRUDE

Because the country's first president will be a king.

GHALLAL

In your country, is the president also a king?

GERTRUDE

No. The king is... well, the king. It's a hereditary position. People vote for the prime minister. Tell me, are you planning to vote for Faisal?

GHALLAL

I thought you said it is a secret.

GERTRUDE

It is if you want it to be.

GHALLAL

Does *Khatoun* tell people who she votes for?

GERTRUDE

No... Most women in the United Kingdom don't vote.

GHALLAL

They do not vote?

GERTRUDE

They depend on the male members of their family to protect their interests. As is the case in this country.

GHALLAL

Khatoun has never voted?

GERTRUDE

You're quite a question box, aren't you, Ghallal? I am against giving the vote to the unschooled and other assorted riff-raff... If you permitted that, one can imagine what kind of government you'd end up with.

GHALLAL

What does it mean... 'question box'?

GERTRUDE

(Reworking a stitch)

A 'question box' is... a windbag that asks questions.

GAZI

(Pointing at the train)

How do you make it stop?

(GERTRUDE looks at the train)

GERTRUDE

I assume there's a brake. Look in the locomotive... the first car.

(He looks in the train, then pulls a lever beside the track and the train stops)

You're a born engineer, your majesty. You know during the war Colonel Cornwallis and your father used to blow up trains together.

GAZI

With all the people inside?

GERTRUDE

Turkish soldiers. Actually they blew up the tracks, and when the train derailed they attacked them.

GAZI

I want to try it too. I'll load the train full of soldiers, run it as fast I can and watch them fly through the air.

GERTRUDE

Trains are not meant to fly. I'll order you a bi-plane from Harrod's.

GHALLAL

What would *Khatoun* like me to tell Izzat Pasha?

GERTRUDE

Tell him... his report on mixed-sex classrooms is riveting literature. I can't wait to find out how it ends. Say I'll meet with him next week.

(As he's leaving)

What do you think of the flag, Ghallal?

GHALLAL

I think every country should have one. And *Khatoun* should thank her father for making ours.

(GHALLAL exits)

GERTRUDE

You'd better get up off the floor, your majesty.
You're destroying your suit.

(GHAZI stands and dusts himself off)

We need to work on your posture for the inauguration.

(She places a book on his head. SAYID and
MADAME TALIB enter unseen and watch GHAZI
and GERTRUDE)

I want you to walk over and touch Mosul.

(He walks toward the map)

Spine erect and look straight ahead. Don't worry about
stumbling. I'll watch the floor.

(He searches for Mosul)

Right above Baghdad. Follow the Tigris with your
finger up to Samarra. It's over to the left, beside
Kirkuk.

GHAZI

Where is my father?

GERTRUDE

He's at a meeting with the most important men in
Baghdad.

SAYID

Why wasn't I invited?

GERTRUDE

(Startled)

Sayid? And Madame Talib. What a pleasant surprise.

MADAME TALIB

Do not stop because of us, Miss Bell. Your geography
lesson is very entertaining. It is like watching an
old thief teach a young one how to rob your house.

SAYID

You asked me to stop by before my presentation at the
ministry.

GERTRUDE

So I did, which is why I didn't bother you about
Faisal's get-together.

(MADAME TALIB watches as GERTRUDE quickly
folds up the flag and picks up a sheaf of
papers. To SAYID)

GERTRUDE (Contd)

I wanted to make sure you'd received a copy of Izzat Pasha's fascinating report.

SAYID

I assumed you wanted to discuss the election, *Khatoun*.

GERTRUDE

Our position on the election is quite clear, Sayid. All we care about is that the vote reflect the will of the Iraqi people.

GHAZI

May I take this book off my head?

GERTRUDE

By all means, your majesty.

SAYID

Your majesty?

GERTRUDE

His father is an *emir*.

MADAME TALIB

I thought his father was the new British marionette.

SAYID

(To MADAME TALIB)

His father used to be the King of Syria. Now he is the king of nothing.

GERTRUDE

My sources tell me you've been threatening his supporters, Sayid.

MADAME TALIB

I told you my husband does not like sharing his dinner with another lap dog.

SAYID

You and Sir Percy promised you would support me, *Khatoun*.

GERTRUDE

We still do, but the British government can not stand in the way of democracy.

SAYID

How can my friends vote for me? My name does not even appear on the ballot.

GERTRUDE

That's because the vote is not an election, it's a referendum. A simple yes-no vote, in answer to a simple question, 'Do you want this man, Faisal, to be your king'?

MADAME TALIB

See what she learned riding through the desert dressed as a man. The one word no Arab will ever say to anyone is 'no.'

SAYID

If this 'referendum' is not honest, thousands of men with rifles will rise up to demand a true result.

GERTRUDE

That sort of talk is not helpful, Sayid.

SAYID

I am simply reflecting the will of the people, *Khatoun*.

MADAME TALIB

We should be going. You will be late for your meeting.

GERTRUDE

Don't forget the report.

(She hands him the report)

I think you'll agree it has the potential to revolutionize education in Iraq.

(SAYID and MADAME TALIB exit)

GHAZI

May I play with my train?

GERTRUDE

Of course, your majesty.

GERTRUDE (Contd)

(He sits and begins playing with the train.
To GHAZI as she dials the telephone)

I was serious about ordering you a bi-plane. They have exact models of the Vikram bombers we use here in Iraq.

(Into the phone)

Hello... Yes... Just this minute... The ministry... Across the bridge.

(She hangs up)

GHAZI

Do they have real bombs?

GERTRUDE

I assume they must. Replicas, that is. They don't actually explode, I hope.

(Enter GHALLAL)

GHALLAL

Colonel Cornwallis and Emir Faisal have arrived.

(Enter FAISAL and KINAHAN)

GERTRUDE

(To KINAHAN)

How did your meeting go?

KINAHAN

Very smoothly.

GERTRUDE

(To FAISAL)

I knew they would like you.

FAISAL

Your friends are serious people.

GERTRUDE

What did you talk about?

(GHAZI comes to his father's side)

FAISAL

The mandate.

GERTRUDE

Do they have strong opinions on the subject?

FAISAL

Their opposition to the occupation is unanimous.

GERTRUDE

What else did you discuss?

FAISAL

Abdel Khodary told me that Anglo-Persian has just discovered a large deposit of oil near Mosul.

GERTRUDE

I met his wife at Sitt Cox's tea party. She uses more mascara than any woman in Baghdad.

FAISAL

He said Mr. Churchill is converting the entire British fleet from coal to petroleum.

GERTRUDE

Did you discuss the referendum?

FAISAL

I received a firm commitment from all of the participants.

KINAHAN

You have Gertrude... Miss Bell... to thank for that. She's been lobbying every notable in Iraq on your behalf.

GERTRUDE

(To KINAHAN)

I'm sure it was the combination of the two of you. I was just telling Ghazi how you used to take out Turkish troop trains during the war.

GHAZI

Miss Bell is going to buy me a bi-plane.

FAISAL

A bi-plane?

GERTRUDE

A Vikram bomber.

GAZI

With real bombs.

GERTRUDE

Replicas of real bombs.

GAZI

(To KINAHAN)

Will you show me how you blew up the trains?

(They speak over one another's lines here)

KINAHAN

Certainly. Your father and I use to place the charges here, below the tracks, just before the curve...

FAISAL

(Eyes the flag)

What is this, *Khatoun*?

GERTRUDE

The new flag of Iraq. My father designed it.

KINAHAN

...because the trains have to slow down.

GERTRUDE

Do you like it?

FAISAL

It... has many colors, and a crown in the middle.

KINAHAN

Then we'd unroll the cable and bury it beneath the sand and hide behind a dune.

GERTRUDE

The crown is in your honor.

KINAHAN

When the train came we would press the detonator and..

FAISAL

Why did *Khatoun's* father design the flag of Iraq?

GERTRUDE

The referendum is next week. We were in a bit of a pinch.

GHAZI

(He pushes the train on its side)

Boom!

(MADAME TALIB enters unannounced, furious)

MADAME TALIB

Where is my husband?

GHALLAL

(Trying to bar her way)

Khatoun is in a meeting.

GERTRUDE

It's all right, Ghallal. Let her pass.

MADAME TALIB

Where is Sayid?

GERTRUDE

You tell me. You just left with him.

MADAME TALIB

A jeep... a truck... parked by the Tigris... three of your officers.

GERTRUDE

What happened?

MADAME TALIB

The truck... They took him away.

GERTRUDE

Apparently he's been arrested.

MADAME TALIB

Arrested? On what charge?

GERTRUDE

I don't know. I assume the charges are contained in the warrant.

MADAME TALIB

Who authorized this warrant?

GERTRUDE

The justice ministry oversees arrests.

MADAME TALIB

You knew, didn't you? You sat here with Sayid and didn't say a word.

GERTRUDE

We don't involve ourselves in local legal matters. That's the domain of the provisional government.

MADAME TALIB

He was kidnapped by British soldiers!

KINAHAN

Arrested. British soldiers don't kidnap people, Madame.

GERTRUDE

The local authorities must have requested our help.

MADAME TALIB

Where is he? Where did you take him?

GERTRUDE

That depends on the nature of the charge.

KINAHAN

The arresting officers didn't say anything?

MADAME TALIB

Sedition... something like this. It happened very fast.

GERTRUDE

If it's sedition, the ministry may have asked for a deportation order.

MADAME TALIB

Deportation?

GERTRUDE

My guess would be Ceylon.

MADAME TALIB

You sent Sayid to Ceylon?

GERTRUDE

The local authorities sent him. For inciting rebellion, apparently.

MADAME TALIB

(Sneering at the term; she knows what it means)

What does this mean, 'inciting rebellion'?

GERTRUDE

Stirring up trouble. Calling for *jihad*.

MADAME TALIB

Talking? Sayid was kidnapped for talking?

KINAHAN

Arrested.

GERTRUDE

He's been threatening people who want to vote 'yes' in the referendum.

MADAME TALIB

Who heard him say this? Where is the proof?

GERTRUDE

He just told me if the election didn't turn out to his liking, there'd be another insurrection.

MADAME TALIB

And you arrest him like magic ten minutes later?

GERTRUDE

We just quelled one rebellion. We're not going to allow another.

MADAME TALIB

(Looks at FAISAL)

You did this for him, didn't you?

GERTRUDE

The people of this country deserve a free and fair election.

FAISAL

My heart goes out to you, Madame.

MADAME TALIB

(To FAISAL)

How does it feel to be the new British bootlicker?

GERTRUDE

You can't talk that way to his majesty.

MADAME TALIB

Are you going to kidnap me for talking too?

(She exits, furious)

GHAZI

(To KINAHAN)

After you blow up the train, show me how you shoot all the soldiers.

Scene Six

(MUSIC UP: *Pomp and Circumstance*. After a few moments, LIGHTS UP on courtyard. It is early morning. SIR PERCY, with a sash on his uniform and another more elaborate one in his hand, stands in the courtyard waiting. Enter KINAHAN and FAISAL, stepping slowly to the music. They are followed by GERTRUDE, GHALLAL--who is carrying the British flag--and GHAZI--who is wearing a military cap and carrying the new Iraqi flag. As KINAHAN and FAISAL take their places beside SIR PERCY for FAISAL'S coronation, GERTRUDE, GHALLAL and GHAZI stand downstage, presenting the flags)

GERTRUDE

You look marvelous, your majesty. How does it feel to be carrying the new flag of Iraq?

GHAZI

It is not as ugly as Ghallal's.

GERTRUDE

I'll tell father. He'll be thrilled to hear it's less hideous than the Union Jack.

(MUSIC FADES. SIR PERCY steps forward)

SIR PERCY

Allahu Akhbar.

ALL

(In unison)

Allahu Akhbar!

SIR PERCY

We are gathered here this morning to affirm the choice of the Iraqi people. The men of this multifarious land have participated in a wonderful display of democracy: the Sunnis of Tekrit and Fallujah, the Shi'a of Basrah and the Euphrates, the Jews of Baghdad, the Kurds of Mosul and the Assyrians of Arbil. They have raised

SIR PERCY (Contd)

their voices in a harmonious chorus. In the referendum sponsored by the high commissioner, ninety-six per cent of voters have chosen as their leader this son of the Sharif of Mecca. As the representative of His Majesty's Government, I applaud this act of self-determination and declare Emir Faisal ibn Husain, King of Iraq.

(SIR PERCY pins the sash on FAISAL. MUSIC UP: "God Save the King")

GHALLAL

(To GERTRUDE)

What is this song, *Khatoun*?

GERTRUDE

"God Save the King." It is a British tune.

GHALLAL

Why do they not play an Iraqi song?

GERTRUDE

Because we didn't have time to compose a national anthem, Ghallal.

(To GHAZI)

Don't let the flag touch the ground, your majesty. And stand up straight.

Scene Seven

("God Save the King" FADES. FADE UP ON A SLOW, MOURNFUL OUD AND A SOLO MALE VOICE SINGING A BOATMAN'S BALLAD. In the garden in the late afternoon, FAISAL and GERTRUDE sit on a blanket by the banks of the Tigris, a picnic basket in front of them. Opposite, further along the river's edge, stands SIR PERCY, shotgun in hand. GHALLAL and GHAZI'S eyes follow as he takes aim at a bird)

FAISAL

(Pulling items out of the basket)
Sardines, melon, olives, sheep's tongue... What would *Khatoun* like?

GERTRUDE

I don't really have an appetite.

(SOUND OF A SHOT as SIR PERCY shoots)

SIR PERCY

Fiddlesticks!

FAISAL

He missed.

GERTRUDE

He's an excellent administrator, but a lousy shot. Which is fortunate for the waterfowl.

FAISAL

You must eat something.

GERTRUDE

Go ahead. I'll nibble in a minute.

(Pointing to the boats in the river)

Look at the *guffahs* spinning across the river. Isn't it amazing how the pilots know precisely the point from which to launch their boats so the currents will carry them to the landing on the other side?

FAISAL

You are at home here, aren't you, *Khatoun*?

GERTRUDE

I don't have a home anymore, your majesty. In that we're the same. We're like two lost Bedouins wandering in the desert.

FAISAL

We should go riding together. I just bought another stallion. You could show me my kingdom.

GERTRUDE

You should see it from the air, your majesty.

FAISAL

I know how to pilot an aeroplane.

GERTRUDE

The view from above is magnificent.

FAISAL

When shall we go?

GERTRUDE

Whenever you'd like. Why don't we go... now.

FAISAL

Now?

GERTRUDE

Babylon is only fifty miles that way. We take off... and bank to the left... and rise... up through the clouds. There, to the south, you can see it. The capstone of a ziggurat, six hundred feet high: the Tower of Babel!

FAISAL

Shall we land and look at it?

GERTRUDE

Over there, beside the Hanging Gardens of Nebuchadnezzar.

FAISAL

A clear approach, a perfect descent, a landing smooth as silk.

GERTRUDE

(She takes his arm)

I'll show you... Alexander's theatre. Come, let's strut across the stage... Now down the dark steps to the basement... to the squalid room where our hero succumbed to fever at the age of 35.

FAISAL

And next, we take off for...

GERTRUDE

Ukhaider.

FAISAL

Ukhaider?

GERTRUDE

Straight ahead. Look down there, to your right, in the desert. The castle I discovered.

FAISAL

Khatoun discovered a castle?

GERTRUDE

Before I left Aleppo, I pored over the ancient maps... and surmised it must be west of Karbala... a fortress built in the eighth century by a nephew of the Abassid caliphs. Pass low... There... you can see the inscriptions etched in the limestone walls... They're in Safayia, a Yemeni language no one knows.

FAISAL

And now. Where shall we go?

GERTRUDE

East. To the Euphrates... along the Diyala... to the confluence with the Tigris. There, on the far bank... See the palace... with the enormous arch? It's the largest in the world. Ctesiphon. And beside it the entrance to Chosroes' throne room.

FAISAL

Who is Chosroes?

GERTRUDE

Your regal forebear, your majesty. King of the Sassanians. The wind from our propeller draws aside the curtain, a garden woven from wool, sixty cubits square: the ground gold, the paths silver, the flowers an array of precious stones. Cover your eyes, quickly. There he sits, upon his throne, his jeweled tiara reflecting the light of a thousand lamps. Have you ever seen anything so glorious?

FAISAL

Never, in all my life. What became of him?

GERTRUDE

The invading Arab armies deposed him.. in the seventh century.

FAISAL

In that case, let's not linger. Where to now, *Khatoun*?

(TWO GUNSHOTS RING OUT IN RAPID SUCCESSION)

GERTRUDE

I'm afraid we're low on petrol. It's back to Baghdad.

(Conversations between SIR PERCY and GHAZI and GERTRUDE and FAISAL overlap)

SIR PERCY

I think I finally got one. Fetch it for me, Ghallal.

FAISAL

It was a splendid tour.

GHAZI

Is it for the picnic, Sir Cokus?

SIR PERCY

For my collection.

GHAZI

Collection?

FAISAL

I have decided to appoint you my chief of culture.

GERTRUDE

I already have a job. I'm the Oriental Secretary.

FAISAL

But no one else knows Iraq as you do.

SIR PERCY

Birds. I have over half the species in Mesopotamia.

GHAZI

Are they alive?

SIR PERCY

Quite dead, most of them. But I have a superb taxidermist from Jibbah. Our den resembles an aviary.

GERTRUDE

What would my duties be?

FAISAL

To protect the country's treasures from plunderers ...including the British.

GHAZI

How many birds do you have, Sir Cokus?

SIR PERCY

Over sixty species. Storks, egrets, cormorants. I even have a live eagle I feed dead bats to. I keep them in the icebox, which drives *Sitt* Cox crazy.

FAISAL

We must find you a building to house the collection.

GERTRUDE

You're offering me my own museum?

FAISAL

You will be in charge of all Iraq's antiquities.

GHAZI

Can I feed dead bats to the eagle?

(KINAHAN enters, carrying a bottle in a sack)

SIR PERCY

Certainly, my boy.

(GHAZI runs after GHALLAL. To KINAHAN)
Where are you headed, Colonel?

KINAHAN

I was looking for Miss Bell.

SIR PERCY

She's by the river picnicking with our new monarch.

KINAHAN

Perfect afternoon for it.

SIR PERCY

I hope he doesn't spoil it by giving her an earful about the mandate.

KINAHAN

If he tries, she'll set him straight. She knows the mandate's non-negotiable.

SIR PERCY

Actually, we've decided to drop the mandate.

KINAHAN

Drop it?

SIR PERCY

But she doesn't need to know that.

KINAHAN

Why not?

SIR PERCY

If Faisal thinks we're inflexible, it will be easier to convince his ministers to agree to our terms, so we can start the withdrawal.

KINAHAN

We're withdrawing?

SIR PERCY

Some of us are withdrawing, though we won't announce it until we get firm assurances from the Iraqis.

KINAHAN

What about Gertrude? When she discovers she's been deceived, she'll be furious.

SIR PERCY

She can honestly say she didn't know. Which is why it's imperative that you don't tell her.

(GHALLAL and GHAZI arrive with the bird.

To GHALLAL)

Made quite a mess of him, didn't I?

GHALLAL

(Holding up the bird between his thumb and forefinger)

I think it will be hard to stuff, Sir Cokus.

FAISAL

You are aware that Colonel Cornwallis is no longer married?

GERTRUDE

What business is that of mine?

FAISAL

He is quite fond of you.

GERTRUDE

He just extricated himself from one Gertrude. I can't imagine he's searching for another.

FAISAL

Khatoun would make someone a wonderful wife.

GERTRUDE

He's my junior by a decade. I'm what they call a surplus woman. When it becomes clear we're not marriage material they ship us off to Australia by the boatload.

FAISAL

Women are not identical pearls. You are a very rare jewel.

GERTRUDE

I bet you say that to all your concubines, your majesty.

FAISAL

Only to you, *Khatoun*.

(He takes her hand)

I must request one favor from you.

GERTRUDE

You know I can't deny you anything.

FAISAL

I need you to speak to Sir Cokus about the mandate.
All Iraqis I know despise it.

GERTRUDE

We're handing over power as fast as we can, your
majesty.

FAISAL

My ministers have all threatened to resign unless I
renounce it.

GERTRUDE

Sir Percy is not going to give up our present position
until our future interests are secured. He's told me
repeatedly he will not abandon the mandate.

FAISAL

They think the only reason you are here is to steal
their oil.

GERTRUDE

That's a bit simplistic, don't you think? Thousands of
British soldiers lost their lives liberating this
country, and British taxpayers expended millions of
pounds helping to rebuild it. It's only reasonable to
expect some return on their investment.

FAISAL

You have made me king of a very strange country,
Khatoun. It has a mandate no one agreed to, but to end
it I must sign a treaty with the British, which I can
not negotiate because my ministers all reject the
mandate.

GERTRUDE

Democracy is imperfect. But you're certainly better
off here than you were in Syria.

(THE CALL TO PRAYER FROM VARIOUS DIRECTIONS)

FAISAL

Arab countries, like women, are not identical pearls, *Khatoun*. You cannot simply exchange one for the other.

GERTRUDE

Forgive me, your majesty, but the only reason your father is still in power in Mecca is because of British support. If we withdrew our backing, Ibn Saud would control the Arabian peninsula in a month and your father would be sipping tea in Constantinople.

FAISAL

So I must agree to be half a king because the British do not keep their promises?

GERTRUDE

We all have to live with compromises.

(SHOTGUN BLAST RINGS OUT)

SIR PERCY

I hit it dead on! A tufted mallard! Grab it before the fish get it, Ghallal.

FAISAL

Ghazi.

(FAISAL gestures to GHAZI who exits with him. GHALLAL hands the bird to SIR PERCY and exits. CALL TO PRAYER CONTINUES. KINAHAN enters)

KINAHAN

Gertrude.

GERTRUDE

I wondered where you were.

KINAHAN

I went for a walk with Sally.

GERTRUDE

She's the most pampered girl in Baghdad.

KINAHAN

Certainly the most coddled cocker spaniel.

GERTRUDE

I bet the Baghdadis have no idea what to make of her. They think all canines are first cousins to hyenas.

KINAHAN

This is quite a picnic you've assembled here.

GERTRUDE

Faisal just left. He's furious with me.

KINAHAN

He went to pray.

GERTRUDE

We were discussing the mandate. He thinks I'm trying to humiliate him.

KINAHAN

He's afraid of looking weak.

GERTRUDE

I simply relayed Sir Percy's message that there's no wiggle room on the matter.

KINAHAN

(He pours drinks from the bottle)

His position on the subject is quite clear. I brought you a gin *without* tonic.

GERTRUDE

A martini!

(She puts an olive in it)

KINAHAN

A very dry martini, Gertrude.

GERTRUDE

You're calling me Gertrude on a regular basis. Should I make anything of it?

KINAHAN

All taint has been removed from your moniker. Cheers!

GERTRUDE

Cheers!

(CALL TO PRAYER CONTINUES)

KINAHAN

Any chance I can interest you in a dip this evening?

GERTRUDE

Certainly. I'll send Ghallal by my place to pick up my bathing costume. It's funny, Faisal was actually trying to... put the two of us together. Isn't that preposterous?

KINAHAN

We are together.

GERTRUDE

I mean...

KINAHAN

Yes, I know what you mean.

Scene Eight

(CALL TO PRAYER FADES. SOUNDS OF VOICES CHANTING UP. AN ANGRY CROWD OUTSIDE THE COLONIAL OFFICE IS CHANTING: 'DOWN WITH THE MANDATE,' 'IRAQI OIL IS OUR OIL,' AND 'BRITISH OUT NOW.' Lights up on KINAHAN and FAISAL seated in facing chairs in GERTRUDE'S office. KINAHAN is peeling a pomegranate with a pen knife as GHAZI, who is now dressed in a miniature military uniform, wanders about the room making spins and dives with a model RAF bomber. On the floor below him are lines of lead soldiers. GHALLAL, whose eyes alternate between the swoops of GHAZI'S plane and the MENACING VOICES OUTSIDE, stands by the door)

KINAHAN

A piece of pomegranate?

(FAISAL shakes his head)

Something to drink?

(FAISAL holds his palm up)

Bring his majesty a glass of tamarind juice, Ghallal.

FAISAL

No. Nothing.

KINAHAN

You're sweating, your majesty.

FAISAL

We are all sweating, Colonel. It's August.

KINAHAN

I'm concerned you're getting a fever.

(He hands FAISAL his handkerchief. Outside the VOICES ARE LOUDER, MORE INSISTENT)

What about a bite to eat? Dried dates? Pistachios?

FAISAL

No nuts. I have indigestion.

KINAHAN

Bring his majesty a bicarbonate of soda, Ghallal.

(To FAISAL)

Where is it bothering you?

(GHALLAL exits to fetch the bicarbonate)

FAISAL

Down here.

KINAHAN

Pain or nausea?

FAISAL

A bit of both. It must be the lamb I had for breakfast.

GHAZI

(Referring to the CROWD OFF as he swoops about with the plane)

Why are they shouting?

FAISAL

They are angry at your father.

(To KINAHAN)

When will *Khatoun* arrive?

KINAHAN

She'll be back this morning. She and Sir Percy flew down to Nasiriyah to resolve an agrarian dispute.

FAISAL

Why didn't they take me with them?

KINAHAN

It's nothing you need to get involved in. Two *sheikhs* suddenly decided to stop paying their taxes.

GHAZI

(Referring to the CROWD OFF)

Why are they angry at you, father?

FAISAL

Because I do what Colonel Cornwallis tells me to.

KINAHAN

They're angry because you waver, your majesty. One day you say you won't countenance violence, the next you coddle those who incite it.

FAISAL

When notables offer petitions I am obliged to listen.

KINAHAN

The only thing this crew outside is notable for is political agitation.

FAISAL

They are nationalists exercising their right to oppose the mandate.

KINAHAN

Call them what you like. If you don't show them a firm hand, this country will come unraveled.

(GHALLAL enters with a soda, which he gives to FAISAL, and a telegram, which he hands to KINAHAN. As the VOICES OUTSIDE GROW MORE INSISTENT, GHAZI makes a swooping dive with the bomber toward the soldiers on the floor, loudly imitating the RAT-A-TAT-TAT of a machine gun)

KINAHAN

(Looking at the telegram)

It's from Major Noel in Sulamaniyah. They're under attack from Kurdish tribes. He needs immediate air support.

FAISAL

I will confer with my defense minister.

KINAHAN

Your defense minister resigned last week. He's out there leading the protest.

FAISAL

I will convene a cabinet meeting.

KINAHAN

The only minister left in your cabinet is Izzat Pasha.

FAISAL

I need to speak to my advisers.

KINAHAN

I'm the only adviser you have, and I advise you to send a bomber squadron and as many levies as we can muster.

(GHAZI swoops with his bi-plane, IMITATING
THE RAT-A-TAT-TAT OF A MACHINE GUN)

FAISAL

My ministers resigned because they think you are
running the government.

KINAHAN

We're not running the government, your majesty. You
are.

FAISAL

This bicarbonate did nothing. I don't think it's a
simple case of indigestion.

KINAHAN

Major Noel is waiting for your response. I suggest an
immediate, full-scale air assault.

FAISAL

Bomb my own subjects?

KINAHAN

British soldiers are surrounded.

FAISAL

Sulamaniyah is a village with women and children.

KINAHAN

Major Noel couldn't be clearer. The entire region is
in revolt. If our enemies see you do nothing, every
government office in Iraq will turn into a target.

(FAISAL GROANS)

You need to call the base at Halabiyah and order our
aeroplanes into the air.

FAISAL

It is a very sharp pain.

KINAHAN

British soldiers are under attack. Shall I make the
call myself?

(The CHANTING RISES. SIR PERCY and GERTRUDE,
who is elegantly dressed in a sheer shawl
and white fabric hat, enter)

GERTRUDE

Inexcusable. Did you hear what he said?

SIR PERCY

Something about the mandate. I couldn't catch the final phrase.

GERTRUDE

'Death to the mandate.' It couldn't have been clearer.

(To FAISAL)

How could such a thing happen, your majesty?

FAISAL

I have no idea what *Khatoun* is referring to.

GERTRUDE

When Sir Percy walked through the crowd outside, someone shouted, 'death to the mandate.'

FAISAL

I can't control the opinions of others.

GERTRUDE

I saw members of your personal staff in the crowd.

FAISAL

I will reprimand them.

GERTRUDE

Reprimand them? They should be dismissed.

FAISAL

They have already resigned.

GERTRUDE

Then they should be arrested.

FAISAL

They are exercising their right under the constitution *Khatoun* is so anxious I should sign.

(Grabs his stomach)

You must excuse me. I have terrible indigestion.

KINAHAN

We have a crisis on our hands.

SIR PERCY

(To KINAHAN)

The situation in Nasiriyah is worse than we imagined. I think an air raid will convince them to pay the outstanding balance.

FAISAL

We now bomb those who don't pay their taxes?

KINAHAN

(Hands SIR PERCY the telegram)

This just arrived. Sulamaniyah is under assault.

SIR PERCY

(Reading telegram, to FAISAL)

Have you called in air support?

FAISAL

Call my physician. I've never had pain like this in my life.

KINAHAN

His majesty was about to call Halabiyah when you arrived.

FAISAL

The only explanation is appendicitis.

GHALLAL

(To GERTRUDE)

We must take *Emir Faisal* to his doctor immediately, *Khatoun*.

SIR PERCY

He needs to speak to Halabiyah first.

(Picks up the phone)

Get me General Salmond.

FAISAL

I think something has ruptured.

(THE CHANTING CAN STILL BE HEARD OUTSIDE.

GHAZI swoops down on the lead soldiers with his bi-plane)

SIR PERCY

(Into phone)

General Salmond, Sir Percy here. We've got a problem in Sulamaniyah. How many Vikrams can we get into the air in the next fifteen minutes?

FAISAL

I feel as if I've been poisoned.

(GHAZI makes a LOUD RAT-A-TAT-TAT SOUND OF A MACHINE GUN and kicks over a line of soldiers)

GERTRUDE

(Grabs him by the scruff of the neck)

That's quite enough, Prince Ghazi.

SIR PERCY

(Into phone)

Totally unprovoked attack. Let's hit them with the heaviest ordnance we've got. Level the place. One second, I'll put the king on.

FAISAL

My father is the Sharif of Mecca, a direct descendant of the Prophet. My armies defeated the Turks and united the Arab nation. I will not bomb Arabs.

KINAHAN

These are Kurds, your majesty.

FAISAL

You are a genius, Sir Cokus. You have succeeded in doing something no one else could do. You have united all Iraqis. They hate the mandate and they hate you. And now they hate me because you made me accept it.

SIR PERCY

Which is why we've decided to drop the mandate.

GERTRUDE

Drop the mandate?

SIR PERCY

(To FAISAL and GERTRUDE)

I was waiting for the right moment to tell you.

FAISAL

You mean this has all been a charade?

(He falters)

Get my physician. My stomach is on fire.

GERTRUDE

Help his majesty upstairs, Ghallal. And call Doctor Ibrahim immediately.

(CHANTING CAN BE HEARD OUTSIDE as
GHALLAL helps FAISAL out the door)

SIR PERCY

(Into the phone)

It's a go, colonel. And as soon as they're through,
I'll need you to deliver another load to Nasiriyah.
We'll be waiting for your call.

(He hangs up)

(LOUD CHANTING CONTINUES IN THE COURTYARD)

KINAHAN

It's a relief to see someone running the government
again.

SIR PERCY

(To KINAHAN)

And let's charge these agitators outside with sedition
and shut down the papers for a couple of weeks.

(GERTRUDE looks at the two of them)

GERTRUDE

Why did you drop the mandate?

SIR PERCY

Because I secured the assurances I need from Faisal's
ministers.

GERTRUDE

You went behind his back too?

SIR PERCY

I negotiated with the Iraqis.

(GHAZI lines up his soldiers for a final assault)

GERTRUDE

So now you're bombing civilians to make sure his ministers don't renege on their promises?

GHAZI

(Imitating the RAT-A-TAT-TAT OF A MACHINE GUN, he sends the soldiers flying) Appendicitis! Father has appen-di-ci-tis! Appen-di-ci-tis!

GERTRUDE

Come with me, your majesty. I'm going to tend to the king.

(GERTRUDE and GHAZI exit. LIGHTS FADE. OUTSIDE the CHANTS of 'IRAQI OIL FOR THE IRAQI PEOPLE' AND 'BRITISH OUT NOW' CONTINUE)

Scene Nine

(Evening, a couple of weeks later. GERTRUDE sits in a chair in the garden. On the table in front of her are a glass and bottle of brandy and shards of a Sumerian tablet that she is assembling. Sitting in dim light in the colonial office, SIR PERCY and FAISAL are smoking *argileh* and playing a game of backgammon as GHALLAL watches. After a moment, KINAHAN enters the garden from the colonial office)

KINAHAN

We were wondering where you disappeared to.

GERTRUDE

I got a bee in my bonnet about these inscriptions I found in Kish.

KINAHAN

You shouldn't have skipped out before dessert, Gertrude. The *namura* was swimming in rosewater with almonds the size of my thumbnails.

GERTRUDE

I surrendered after the raw liver. Faisal's intimate dinners have a way of turning into endless bacchanals.

KINAHAN

They put our poor picnics to shame.

GERTRUDE

Where is Sir Percy?

KINAHAN

Giving Faisal a thrashing at the backgammon table.

GERTRUDE

Beating them one last time at their own game.

KINAHAN

Aren't you chilly?

GERTRUDE

I've got a bottle of brandy keeping me company. May I offer you a glass?

KINAHAN

I better not. Our plane takes off at five.
(Referring to the tablet)
Have you deciphered what it means?

GERTRUDE

It appears to be a man presenting a basket of dates to the temple.

KINAHAN

And the translation?

GERTRUDE

The basket above the head probably means the bearer is a principal male.

KINAHAN

A big shot going to worship?

GERTRUDE

To be anointed more likely, if Sumerian big shots were anointed four thousand years ago. It's a description of a coronation... in the oldest language known to man. Are you excited about seeing your children?

KINAHAN

I hope they still recognize me.

GERTRUDE

I wrote to father and told him I want you to use our estate at Mount Grace.

KINAHAN

That wasn't necessary.

GERTRUDE

It's a perfect place for children. There are lawns and forests. There's even a pond.

KINAHAN

I'm not sure the idea of using your house will sit too well with the other Gertrude. She's rather petty.

GERTRUDE

Do you have any idea how long it's been since I've seen a proper pond? With ducks and lily pads and grass growing along the banks? It was five years ago, with you and Faisal, at the peace conference in Paris. We had so much hope then, didn't we? I shall miss you, Ken.

KINAHAN

I'll be back before you know it.

GERTRUDE

You're essential here, now that Sir Percy is leaving..

KINAHAN

None of us is essential.. except you. Faisal needs you.

GERTRUDE

Faisal doesn't need me. He doesn't believe a word I say. I humiliated him..

KEN

He's grateful to you.

GERTRUDE

..in front of his son. You know what that means to a Bedouin.

KEN

He knows no one else could have nursed this country into existence.

GERTRUDE

I lied to him. I told him we'd never bend on the mandate, then suddenly we dropped it and announced we're leaving.

KINAHAN

The nationalists insisted on independence, so we gave them independence.

GERTRUDE

With so many strings attached it hardly merits the name. You knew all along, didn't you?

KINAHAN

The policy evolved.

GERTRUDE

It certainly put Faisal in an awkward position.

KINAHAN

I assure you, he knew what he was getting into. He was far more cooperative in London than when he arrived in Baghdad.

GERTRUDE

Why didn't you tell me?

KINAHAN

Sir Percy told me not to. He thought if you believed it was true, you'd be more convincing. He's also an admirer of Machiavelli.

GERTRUDE

Perhaps I'll go back to England too.

KINAHAN

What would you do in England?

GERTRUDE

I haven't a clue.

KINAHAN

The museum here needs you.

GERTRUDE

For what?

KINAHAN

You know more about ancient relics than anyone in Iraq.

GERTRUDE

Sometimes I feel like one myself.

(Looks at the sky)

There's an eclipse tonight.

KINAHAN

I'm glad I'm not leaving till dawn. I despise flying in the dark. There's something I've been wanting to ask you, Gertrude. It's about my going away.

GERTRUDE

Yes.

KINAHAN

I don't quite know how to broach the subject.

GERTRUDE

You've lived too long in the East, Ken. Do it directly.

KINAHAN

Will you...

GERTRUDE

Are you sure you don't want a brandy?

KINAHAN

Positive... Will you...

GERTRUDE

(She takes his hand)

...tell me, Ken.

KINAHAN

...take care of Sally?

GERTRUDE

Sally?

KINAHAN

She's very well behaved.

GERTRUDE

That's what you wanted to ask me?

KINAHAN

And she adores you.

GERTRUDE

She adores me?

KINAHAN

She has a very sweet disposition.

GERTRUDE

I know she does.

KINAHAN

And she's quite intelligent.

GERTRUDE

You want me to feed her while you're away?

KINAHAN

It would be an enormous favor. You know how Baghdadis are with dogs. Do you mind?

GERTRUDE

Mind? No, I don't mind.

KINAHAN

Did you think...?

GERTRUDE

You're quite obtuse, aren't you, Ken?

KINAHAN

That's exactly what the other Gertrude said.

GERTRUDE

She sounds like a very intelligent woman.

KINAHAN

I'd better be off. I have to pack the presents for the children. I'll leave the key with my landlady. Goodbye, Gertrude.

(He exits)

GERTRUDE

Safe travels, Ken.

(She pours herself a glass of brandy and drinks. As she fiddles with the shards, she begins to shiver. After a few moments, FAISAL enters and walks to her)

FAISAL

You have been hiding from me, *Khatoun*.

GERTRUDE

I'm studying specimens, your majesty.

FAISAL

You are shivering.

GERTRUDE

It feels like a desert chill. I find the air refreshing.

FAISAL

I will have Ghallal make us tea.

GERTRUDE

I already have a drink.

FAISAL

Sir Percy just destroyed me in a game of backgammon.

GERTRUDE

Apparently he does that to everyone in Iraq, except the ducks.

(He sits beside her)

FAISAL

Have you ever seen so many stars? Look, there is Ishtar, queen of the skies. She is lying beside her lover, her son, Tammuz. She is caressing his thighs.

GERTRUDE

That must be why he has a twinkle in his eyes.
(He laughs and holds her hand)

FAISAL

I loved the show *Khatoun* took me to last night. I have not laughed so hard in 20 years.

GERTRUDE

The RAF boys loved performing for you.

FAISAL

They are very talented actors.

GERTRUDE

Flying bombers is obviously not their only skill.

FAISAL

The British pilots have beautiful voices.

GERTRUDE

Beautiful legs, too.

FAISAL

Several times during the show I had to remind myself they were not actual women.

GERTRUDE

Some of them look better in a skirt than I do.

FAISAL

It is a novelty to see so many English men in dresses.

GERTRUDE

It's not as rare as you think. The major asked me to put you in the front row so you wouldn't miss a thing.

FAISAL

Where is Colonel Cornwallis?

GERTRUDE

He went home to pack.

FAISAL

I shall miss him.

GERTRUDE

We shall all miss him. Where is Ghazi?

FAISAL

He disappeared after dinner. I think he is ashamed.

GERTRUDE

Ashamed of what?

FAISAL

His father. Last week one of his playmates called the king a lackey. They ended up in a fistfight.

GERTRUDE

I'm sure it's just a phase, your majesty.

FAISAL

I wish I could return home.

GERTRUDE

Home?

FAISAL

Mecca.

GERTRUDE

Ibn Saud controls the entire Hejaz.

FAISAL

I miss riding with my men in the moonlight.

GERTRUDE

He wouldn't let you anywhere near Mecca.

FAISAL

I love the desert air. It's like a potion.

GERTRUDE

Your father's not even welcome in Aqaba.

FAISAL

Khatoun assured me my father would be protected.
Another promise the British did not keep.

GERTRUDE

I'm not responsible for everything my government does,
your majesty. I was busy making you king of this
country.

FAISAL

It will not last, *Khatoun*.

GERTRUDE

What will not last?

FAISAL

This country you made up.

GERTRUDE

Iraq is a sovereign state.

FAISAL

The army is foreign, the air force is foreign, we are foreign. These people will never welcome us. Don't you wish to go home, too?

GERTRUDE

This is the only home I have.

FAISAL

Has *Khatoun* never been to Mecca? There is nowhere like it on earth.

GERTRUDE

I tried to go once, but I only got as far as Hayyil.

FAISAL

Hayyil is the most violent city in Arabia.

(As GERTRUDE speaks, FAISAL puts his arm around her shoulder. THE ECLIPSE OF THE MOON BEGINS)

GERTRUDE

I was greeted at the gate by a group of smiling slaves, who proceeded to take me prisoner. They pitched my tent in a courtyard used to lodge the Persian *Hajj*. I was tended by Said, a little eunuch who worked in the Rashids' harem...

FAISAL

They are a horrible clan. You are lucky you are still alive.

GERTRUDE

...and a Circassian woman named Turkiyyeh, who repeated every word I said to the *emir's* grandmother, the old hag behind my captivity. I've never been so frightened in my life. Four of the six male heirs had already been butchered, and the *emir's* adviser had his throat cut while I was there. I tried everything to make them release me... bribes, threats, names of local *mullahs*. Nothing worked. I sat in my tent for days, and waited. Then one night a servant appeared with a mare and an invitation from one of the *emir's* wives. He took me through the torchlit streets... I'm sure the town hasn't changed one whit in a thousand years... to the chamber

GERTRUDE (Contd)

of the concubines, the most beautiful girls you've ever seen, with hennaed hair and tattooed eyes, bathed in brocade and embroidered silk, like something out of a Persian picture book. Some of them had been married half a dozen times already, passed from hand to hand like precious heirlooms. The victor, fresh from the slaughter, would take them right there on the carpet, his hands still dripping with the blood of their husbands and children. That's how marriage was consummated in Hayyil.

FAISAL

How did you escape?

(The moon, completely eclipsed, is now dark.
A BANGING NOISE BEGINS IN THE DISTANCE)

GERTRUDE

Said, the little eunuch, arrived one night with a camel and a bag of gold and ordered me to take the road back to Damascus. So I never made it to Mecca.

(Looks toward the BANGING POTS)

What is that noise?

(Enter GHAZI and SIR PERCY, unseen by
FAISAL and GERTRUDE)

FAISAL

They are beating copper pots. To frighten away the dragon who has eaten the moon.

(GERTRUDE laughs. FAISAL squeezes her shoulder. They laugh heartily together. The BANGING RESUMES FROM ANOTHER DIRECTION. They turn and see SIR PERCY and GHAZI. GHAZI, who is obviously not pleased to see his father and GERTRUDE together, scowls and turns quickly and exits into the shadows. FAISAL stands and follows him)

FAISAL

Ghazi. Ghazi, come here to your father.

(He exits, following GHAZI)

SIR PERCY

(To GERTRUDE)

I was hoping I could interest him in one last game of backgammon.

GERTRUDE

I think he prefers to be with his son.

(Arranging the shards)

Would you like a brandy?

SIR PERCY

I would. We're taking off early, and to tell you the truth, I'm a bit queasy about flying.

(She pours him a drink)

GERTRUDE

You? I would never have imagined.

SIR PERCY

Funny, isn't it? An amateur ornithologist who's afraid to fly. Don't breathe a word to *Sitt* Cox. She doesn't have a clue.

GERTRUDE

Your secret is safe with me.

SIR PERCY

I shall miss you, Miss Bell.

GERTRUDE

I shall miss you, too. May I ask you a question, Sir Percy? Why did you lie about the mandate.

SIR PERCY

You were left out of the loop because the Arabs know how much you adore it here. They trust you...

GERTRUDE

They used to.

SIR PERCY

...so I knew they'd believe you when you said we were resolute.

GERTRUDE

You and Ken have children and wives and somewhere to go, Sir Percy. These people are my family. They embraced me, offered me tea beside their campfires, treated me like I was one of them. Made me feel that everything I've done in my life mattered enormously. I really thought we were restoring the greatness of ancient Mesopotamia, rebuilding Arab civilization, but now I see I was nothing more than a pawn in a scheme to divvy up the spoils of war like another horde of Mongol conquerors. In spite of their seeming barbarity, these people, unlike us, actually believe in honor. And when you lie to them repeatedly, they don't cut your throat or spit in your face, they ignore you, they treat you as if you didn't exist, because you've confirmed precisely what they thought about foreigners in the first place. In one blow, you have managed to transform everything I've built, everything I've accomplished in three decades into dust. And we have managed to turn Faisal, an actual Arab hero, into a laughing stock.

SIR PERCY

I assure you, Miss Bell, none of it was personal. Did you say goodbye to Colonel Cornwallis?

GERTRUDE

Yes. He asked me if I would look after Sally.

SIR PERCY

Sally?

GERTRUDE

His cocker spaniel. She's quite intelligent and has a very sweet disposition.

Scene Ten

(LIGHTS UP on Gertrude's office, late afternoon, a month after KINAHAN and SIR PERCY have left. The air is STILL, the GARDEN OUTSIDE SILENT. On the bookcases are now several large photos of the archeological excavations at Ur - the unearthed ziggurat and the diggers in the burial pits. On the map table is a black head form, like those used for jewelry displays. GERTRUDE is leaning down, her back to the audience, behind the map table. She reaches into a box on the floor and removes a *mashshuf*, a tiny ancient replica of a canoe. She blows the dust off of it, wipes it carefully with a cloth and places it on the edge of the table beside Ghazi's miniature bomber. She leans back down toward the box as GHALLAL enters. He is carrying a tray with a pitcher of lemonade, a glass, a plate of *kak*, cheese and olives, and a full bottle of GERTRUDE's pills. As he places the tray on the desk, he sees the tiny canoe)

GHALLAL

A *mashshuf*!

GERTRUDE

A very old *mashshuf*.

GHALLAL

It looks like my Uncle Haji's in Kubaish.

GERTRUDE

I hope his has a bit less grime on it.

(Her head pops up. She is holding an elaborate headdress in her hand, which she places on the table)

GHALLAL

The tar keeps the water from seeping inside when you are fishing.

GERTRUDE

This *mashshuf* is not for fishing. It's for transporting loot to the afterlife. Mr. Woolley, a British archaeologist, found it in a queen's tomb at Ur.

(She wipes the headdress)

GHALLAL

(Examining the *mashshuf*)

Does *Khatoun* still wish to visit Haji's lodge?

GERTRUDE

The marshes in July is not my idea of a pleasure trip, Ghallal.

GHALLAL

We can go in the autumn when it is cooler. I have mentioned several times to my mother that you are most anxious to try her fish balls.

GERTRUDE

I'd hate to depart this world without tasting those. Is anyone outside?

GHALLAL

There are no notables at the moment who desire an audience, *Khatoun*.

GERTRUDE

There seems to be a notable absence of notables lately, doesn't there?

GHALLAL

In summer, many people leave Baghdad for the weekend.

GERTRUDE

If we want company, I suppose we'll have to ring up Izzat Pasha and see if he'd like to discuss mixed-sex classrooms.

GHALLAL

Minister Pasha's daughter has a house in Samarra where the family goes in July.

GERTRUDE

Things are so slow I even miss Sayid Talib.

GHALLAL

He and his wife returned from Ceylon to Basrah last month. Shall I see if they can be reached by telephone?

GERTRUDE

I'm not desperate enough for company to invite Madame Talib to tea. What about Emir Faisal? Have we heard anything from him?

GHALLAL

His majesty has many meetings this week about the border dispute with Turkey.

GERTRUDE

I need his approval before I let Mr. Woolley ship his share of the plunder off to London.

GHALLAL

The Emir is traveling to his country estate today with the minister from Bulgaria.

GERTRUDE

It seems you know more about the affairs of state in Iraq than I do, Ghallal.

GHALLAL

Khatoun should eat the *kak* I brought for her. It is the one she likes from my friend Amin's bakery.

GERTRUDE

That's very kind of you, but the heat spoils my appetite.

GHALLAL

You must eat something so you can swallow your medication.

GERTRUDE

I'll take my medication later.

(She continues cleaning the headdress)

Are you leaving Baghdad this weekend, too?

GHALLAL

I must remain in the city. My wife is preparing to give birth again.

GERTRUDE

Congratulations. When is the child due?

GHALLAL

At any hour. The baby's water came this morning.

GERTRUDE

What are you doing here? You should be with your wife.

GHALLAL

I will go as soon as *Khatoun* takes the medication for her nerves.

(He picks up the canoe)

We should show this *mashshuf* to Ghazi. I'm sure he will like it.

GERTRUDE

I'm afraid Ghazi doesn't care about little boats and planes anymore, Ghallal. I think he's only interested in real ones, so he can kill the British. And I'm not sure as I blame him. I saw him and his father last week at an air show, a demonstration the RAF offered so people could see how we conduct war now. They'd built an imaginary village about a quarter of a mile from where we were all sitting, and they dropped two bombs into the middle of it and set the whole village on fire. Then they dropped bombs all around it, as if to catch all the people trying to flee, and finally two huge firebombs that flared into flames when they exploded in the desert. When the firemen arrived, they couldn't put it out with water. It continued burning, right through metal. When it was over, I smiled at the Emir, who nodded, but Ghazi... had an expression of such hatred on his face. He wouldn't even look at me.

(GERTRUDE places the headdress onto the form)

GHALLAL

(Continues to examine the *mashshuf*)

Does *Khatoun* not miss her own country?

GERTRUDE

I miss my father. I remember when I was a little girl I used to sit in his lap for hours, and he would read Tennyson to me and the two of us would watch the boats in the sea below. Some mornings the entire horizon would fill up with ships.

GHALLAL

You will like riding in a *mashshuf*, *Khatoun*. The trip to the lodge in Amara is the most beautiful one in the marshes.

GERTRUDE

I remember thinking the two of us were married, and he let me think it. He must have liked the idea, too. When he introduced me to Florence, I knew immediately she was going to be his new wife.

GHALLAL

You are certain you do not mind sleeping on a straw mat?

GERTRUDE

When they were married in London, they didn't even invite me to the wedding.

GHALLAL

I will tell Haji to stop at Hudfaidh, *Khatoun*. Have you ever heard of Hudfaidh? It is a magic island in the middle of the marshes where they say everything is twice the normal size. But no one can describe it because when you leave, your tongue is tied in knots.

GERTRUDE

You should go home, Ghallal.

GHALLAL

I will as soon as *Khatoun* eats the *kak* I brought to her.

(She continues searching in the box. He looks at the headdress on the head form)

What is this?

GERTRUDE

It's a crown. From the same tomb Mr. Wooley discovered in Ur. It belonged to the queen, who was accompanied to her grave by an entire entourage. Her soldiers, servants, courtiers, all in ox-drawn chariots, even an orchestra. Each one was holding a golden goblet...

(She places a goblet from the box onto the table)

...and at the appointed hour, as the orchestra played a dirge, they drank poison. And when the slaughter was over, or so I imagine, someone went into the pit and placed a lute and cymbals...

(She places a lute and cymbals from the box on the table)

...on the musicians' bodies and covered them with dirt.

(She cleans the crown and rearranges it as she speaks)

This crown is made of carnelian, from India, and lapis from Afghanistan. It's quite amazing to think about. Two millennia before we arrived, Sumerians were already trading with every civilization in the East. You know what's wonderful about holding something so old in your hands, Ghallal: for a moment your own problems vanish. You should go home.

GHALLAL

Only if *Khatoun* promises to take her medication.

GERTRUDE

I promise. Now go.

(He starts to leave)

Ghallal.

(He turns)

May I ask you a question? Are you and your wife close?

GHALLAL

Close?

GERTRUDE

Is there tenderness between you?

GHALLAL

We are about to have a baby, *Khatoun*.

GERTRUDE

Tell me, what is it like to have someone feel tenderness toward you, to hold you in their arms and take you? I've been twice around the world in every conceivable conveyance from rickshaw to pachyderm, but no one has ever taken me. Do you understand me, Ghallal?

GHALLAL

Khatoun will feel better after she takes her medication.

GERTRUDE

Yes, I will.

(She opens the bottle)

Would you do me a favor? Would you stop by Colonel Cornwallis's house and feed his dog Sally?

GHALLAL

I will go on my way home.

GHALLAL

Does *Khatoun* wish me to return to the office this evening?

GERTRUDE

No, your wife needs you at home. Don't come back tonight.

(He turns to leave)

Ghallal, I'd love to go with you to the marshes. You know how much I like to travel.

(He exits. GERTRUDE continues rearranging the headdress on the form. After a few moments, she pours all of the pills out of the bottle onto the tray. She takes a pill with a swallow of lemonade, then another pill, then another. As she continues taking pills—now three at a time—LIGHTS FADE. THE CALLS TO PRAYER FROM MUEZZIN IN DIFFERENT MOSQUES, NONE OF THEM IN SYNCHRONY, BEGIN FROM VARIOUS DIRECTIONS. THE CALLS REPEAT AND ECHO IN VARIOUS DIRECTIONS. LIGHTS TO BLACK)

- THE END -