

QUEEN OF THE DESERT

by

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(Based on the life of Gertrude Bell 1868 - 1926)

(uncorrected)

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INT. ROUNTON GRANGE, GERTRUDE'S ROOM - DAY

A spacious apartment in Rounton Grange, the family seat of the Lowthian Bell family. Late Victorian style, large windows, high ceilings, stucco, vases with flowers everywhere. Festive mood. Gertrude's apartment consists of a suite of rooms, a study with bookshelves from floor to ceiling, a bedroom, and a large bathroom. A walk-in wardrobe between bedroom and bathroom.

FLORENCE BELL, Gertrude's stepmother, a woman in her early forties, elegant, exuding class, hurries into the bedroom, carrying a spectacular necklace of pearls in her hands. GERTRUDE, throughout this scene, is seated with the back to us. We know immediately that she must be the heroine of our film, but our curiosity is dampened by a stubborn camera.

GERTRUDE wears a beautiful long dress in light mauve colors; her neck and shoulders are free. FLORENCE puts the pearls around GERTRUDE'S neck and tries to lock the chain.

GERTRUDE
Mother. Mother dear...

FLORENCE
What? What is it?

GERTRUDE
The pearls. No pearls, please. We may scare the young men with our wealth.

FLORENCE
You may be right.

FLORENCE hesitates, then puts the pearls away. Handmaids scurry in the background. A hairdresser approaches with a mirror, but is held at a distance by FLORENCE for the moment.

FLORENCE (CONT'D)
I wore this chain when your father asked for my hand.

GERTRUDE'S shoulders sink almost imperceptibly. FLORENCE loses herself in pleasant memories. But then she adopts a more stern, matronly tone.

FLORENCE (CONT'D)
Gertrude!

GERTRUDE'S head sinks slightly.

FLORENCE (CONT'D)
Gertrude, look at me.

GERTRUDE
Mother, please don't tell me.

FLORENCE
Tell you what?

GERTRUDE
How to behave.

FLORENCE
I am afraid to do it anyway. You
will smile.

GERTRUDE
Yes, mother.

FLORENCE
You will not scare the young men
with your intelligence.

GERTRUDE
How do I do that, mother. I cannot
play dumb.

FLORENCE
Just let the men do the talking,
and smile.

GERTRUDE
That will be hard.

FLORENCE
Gertrude!

GERTRUDE, still from behind, stiffens her body. FLORENCE,
exasperated, signals the hairdresser to step forward. With a
few flourishes he arranges a few strands of GERTRUDE'S blond
hair.

HAIRDRESSER
(effeminate)
I love it, I love it, I love it.

He holds the mirror in front of GERTRUDE'S face, and for the
first time through the mirror we look her in the eyes. What
we see is the face of a young woman in her mid- twenties,
beautiful, sensuous, with deep eyes full of warmth and
intelligence.

EXT. ROUNDTON GRANGE - NIGHT

Festive illumination. The avenue leading to Rounton Grange is
lit by torches.

The manor itself is larger than any one belonging to the country gentry, it has the proportions, but not the age of a castle. It is a Victorian dream come true for a spectacularly rich industrialist. All windows are lit.

Coaches line up before the wide stairs that lead to the entrance. Servants bustle, helping the festive guests to step down from the carriages. The horses are immediately taken care of by stable boys. Ladies in evening gowns, the men wear tail coats. Distant music from the ballroom inside and the croaking of frogs from a pond nearby.

INT. ROUNTON GRANGE, BALLROOM - NIGHT

Two huge candelabras and numerous candles illuminate the spectacular ballroom of Roundton Grange. Paintings on the walls, velvet chairs and small marble tables line the large room. The two hundred or so guests in festive mood mill at the dance floor. An excited hum of voices. An orchestra of twenty musicians entertains the guests.

A waiter carrying a tray with champagne approaches a group of guests. We make out FLORENCE entertaining a cluster of elderly ladies. Her demeanor is almost as stiff as her corset. Exchange of formalities and small talk. Only one of the women, LADY ASCOT, is in bitchy mood.

LADY ASCOT

Congratulations! I see the most eligible young men here our country has to offer.

FLORENCE

(proud)

Oh yes, my dear.

LADY ASCOT

The ball of the Duke of Bedford was attended by less.

FLORENCE

Lady Ascot, I am not sure of that.

LADY ASCOT

Oh yes, you are.

This all was meant to ambush FLORENCE.

LADY ASCOT (CONT'D)

But why isn't Gertrude married yet?

FLORENCE has a lot to say, but she decides to overhear the question.

LADY ASCOT (CONT'D)

My four daughters acquired their
husbands before they turned
nineteen. Is there anything wrong
with yours?

Suddenly, the music stops. All eyes turn to the main door where GERTRUDE'S father, HUGH LOWTHIAN BELL, appears with his daughter on his arm. The guests part, leaving an aisle open as if it were a church where the father leads the bride to the altar. But this is no wedding.

GERTRUDE smiles radiantly. She is beautiful. She wears no jewelry. Young men who constitute a good part of the guests eye her with great interest. GERTRUDE hugs the arm of her father.

GERTRUDE

How wonderful, how sweet of you.

HUGH BELL

You deserve it.

GERTRUDE

(reprimanding him)

But father, dearest, you are doing
too much for me. I can be on my own
when it comes to finding a man.

HUGH BELL, tall, dignified, greying beard, stops in the middle of his crowding guests and turns to his daughter. He holds both of her hands and looks her in the eyes.

Close. A moment of intimacy, as if the world of glamor around them did not exist.

HUGH BELL

Gertrude, you know what your first
word was you ever spoke when you
were little?

GERTRUDE

You never told me.

HUGH BELL

You did not say mommy or daddy. The
first thing you ever said when your
nanny tried to put a little dress
on you was "on my own". You pushed
her away.

Gertrude laughs out loud, a beautiful, clear, contagious laughter, so contagious that many of the bystanders, without knowing why, burst out laughing.

FLORENCE casts a proud look in the direction of LADY ASCOT. This will be a memorable gala.

INT. BALLROOM, LATER - NIGHT

Seen from above. The whole ballroom is waltzing, and only a few guests remain seated along the walls. The whole room seems to be floating.

GERTRUDE close; she dances with the young EARL OF CHESTER, a fine looking youth with hands of a violin player. He appears to have exhausted his compliments.

EARL OF CHESTER
Your eyes...your hair...

GERTRUDE
(impatient)
You mentioned that before.

EARL OF CHESTER
Your hands...

GERTRUDE
Yours are much more beautiful than mine.

The poor young nobleman blushes.

EARL OF CHESTER
Your smile...

Looking at FLORENCE who appears to be spinning by in the crowd.

EARL OF CHESTER (CONT'D)
Your smile. You must have inherited it from your mother.

By now, GERTRUDE has had it. She turns cold, but remains friendly, formal.

GERTRUDE
She is not my mother. My mother died when I was three.

EARL OF CHESTER
Oh. Oh, is that so?

Cut. GERTRUDE dances with young WHITTAKER, arrogant, conceited who immediately appears to be without a trace of a chance with GERTRUDE.

GERTRUDE

And then?

EARL OF CHESTER

You mean after the lion?

GERTRUDE

Yes.

EARL OF CHESTER

Then I shot an elephant.

GERTRUDE

Was this still in the south of the Sudan?

EARL OF CHESTER

No. My hunting party had moved to Kenya by then. God, was that a safari.

GERTRUDE

I would guess you shot not only a single elephant there?

EARL OF CHESTER

(proud)

First a rhino, then a lion, and then two big elephant bulls.

GERTRUDE

Earl, I heard of a lumberman who prided himself of having cleared half of Canada of trees. Then he moved to the Sahara desert, and he was asked, why the Sahara, there are no trees. And his answer was: indeed, but only after I was there.

EARL OF CHESTER

Meaning what, young lady?

GERTRUDE

Are there any elephants left in Africa?

And that is that. Cut. GERTRUDE dances with ARNOLD RUNCIE, a big, clumsy young man. Red hair, freckles, a bad dancer. GERTRUDE tries to nudge him softly, but he misunderstands her attempt and moves his body way too close to hers.

RUNCIE

Gertrude, you know what?

GERTRUDE
(caught unawares)
What? What is it?

RUNCIE
I would love to elope with you.

GERTRUDE
(laughing)
Where to? Paris, India, the
pyramids?

RUNCIE
(bluntly)
Out there is a barn.

GERTRUDE
You mean, the hay?

RUNCIE
Yes, nobody would notice if we left
for a few minutes.

GERTRUDE
(amused)
For fornication? Quick and
straightforward.

RUNCIE
Absolutely.

GERTRUDE
Like the cattle in the field.

RUNCIE
Absolutely.

GERTRUDE
Arnold Runcie, I barely know you.
You seem to like cows.

RUNCIE
Absolutely.

GERTRUDE
How many heads of cattle do you
have?

RUNCIE
Near Newcastle I have eight hundred
Herefordshire, and up north in
Scotland two thousand.

GERTRUDE

Angus?

RUNCIE

Angus. Yes, Black Angus.

Gertrude switches her waltz elegantly into a counterclockwise spin which makes the clumsy young churl drift away from her. He lands in the arms of a plump, adoring girl who seems to be more ready for the hay than GERTRUDE.

Cut. GERTRUDE waltzes with a slightly crooked man in his thirties, HAVENHURST. He is bony and very shortsighted, and a bad dancer as well. Silence between the two of them. When the music stops, HAVENHURST releases GERTRUDE, and promptly bows to the young woman next to her.

HAVENHURST

Miss Bell, thank you for the honor.

GERTRUDE

Mr. Havenhurst. Over here, I am over here, to your left.

The orchestra sets in again with the Blue Danube Waltz, but the music sounds strange, distorted with overtones. The entire ballroom revolves around GERTRUDE, slowly, inexorably.

GERTRUDE does not open her lips, but we can hear her whisper.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)

Almighty, send me an earthquake.

QUICK CUT TO:

INT. GERTRUDE'S BATHROOM, WEE HOURS - DAWN

GERTRUDE sits on a stool with her dress folded up over her knees. She has her bare feet in a porcelain bowl. A handmaid fills it with cold water and casts her a sympathetic look. GERTRUDE looks vaguely at herself in the mirror. HUGH BELL leans in the door, and says nothing. FLORENCE paces up and down, but does not want to sound too negative.

FLORENCE

We should not have allowed you to study at Oxford.

A beat.

FLORENCE (CONT'D)

A young woman does not do that.

GERTRUDE starts to cry. But her face does not contort or twitch, and her voice remains almost normal. Only a slight hoarseness betrays the pain inside her.

GERTRUDE
Mother, I want to ride.

FLORENCE
At this hour?

HUGH BELL stirs in the door.

HUGH BELL
Let her. The day is rising.

He walks over to GERTRUDE and puts his hand on her hair. GERTRUDE looks at him in the mirror. No words are needed to understand how much they love each other.

EXT. STABLES, ROUNTON GRANGE - DAWN

A stable boy has saddled GERTRUDE'S beautiful black stallion who nudges her softly with his warm nostrils. GERTRUDE still wears her light mauve ball gown. When she steps into the stirrups we notice that she is still barefoot.

EXT. YORKSHIRE COUNTRYSIDE - DAWN

Like the Bride of the Wind in old ballads, GERTRUDE comes galloping on her black stallion. Heavy clouds in the sky and grey light of the coming day over the undulating hills. Morning dew. Hedges, low stone walls. A frightened roebuck flees across the meadows from the furious rider.

INT. ROUNTON GRANGE, LIBRARY - DAY

Mild afternoon light fills the spacious library of Rounton Grange. Paintings and etchings of steel mills on the walls. The library is stacked with thousands of books, and it is not just for decorative purposes as there are many books piled up on the floor and strewn over a large desk. Even on a couch we make out a mess of opened books and papers with notes.

HUGH BELL and FLORENCE are seated on chairs. GERTRUDE, wearing a house dress now, but still barefoot, paces up and down.

GERTRUDE
Domesticated...domesticity, this is awful, I can't take it any longer.

HUGH BELL

Well, Gertrude, what can I say.

FLORENCE

I can say it: we should not have allowed you to go to Oxford...

HUGH BELL

(protesting)

But dear, she is the first of four women to ever study history, and the first one ever, in any subject, to graduate with highest honors.

FLORENCE

A young, unmarried woman from a good family should not...

GERTRUDE

(cutting her short)

Should not even be allowed into the streets without a chaperone.

HUGH BELL

Gertrude, why don't you sit down.

But GERTRUDE is too agitated to sit down.

HUGH BELL (CONT'D)

Darling, you know that I have always supported you. You have climbed on steep rocks.

FLORENCE

But let us not forget that a string of nannies quit their job over your willfulness.

HUGH BELL

So what. Do you remember climbing the tall beech tree in the park with a big lamp shade strapped to your back?

GERTRUDE

I remember.

FLORENCE

My God, I remember as well.

HUGH BELL

You were only five, and you were already reading voraciously, and you had seen a book on Leonardo da Vinci's sketches.

GERTRUDE

Yes, I remember...the parachute.

FLORENCE

Who will ever need a parachute?

GERTRUDE

Everyone.

HUGH BELL

It hurt me probably more than you when you broke your ankle. I don't want to think about it; it still hurts me today.

GERTRUDE stops her pacing. She sits down on the armrest of her father's leather armchair and puts her arm around his shoulders. A moment of silence and warmth.

GERTRUDE

I have to be out of here. India, Arabia...

FLORENCE

I should not have read the tales of Ali Baba and Aladdin with His Magic Lamp to you. You could not get enough of it. And that was before you even turned four.

GERTRUDE loses herself in fond memories.

GERTRUDE

And Sinbad the Sailor. He was my favorite.

Silence. We hear the warbling of a bird from the park outside.

HUGH BELL

I have built my steel mill...

FLORENCE

(proud)
...the largest in Britain.

HUGH BELL

I did not mean to say that.
Gertrude, what I am trying to say
is this: with all the industries,
with all the incredible technical
innovations, a different age seems
to be upon us. I do not see why the
world should be ruled only by men.

GERTRUDE

But I am against voting rights for
women as long as they are not
educated.

HUGH BELL

(laughing)

You know, the other day the mayor
said the same thing in a town hall
meeting, and a suffragette walked
up to him and bit him in the hand.
Hard, really hard.

FLORENCE

So hard that he had to wear a cast
for three weeks.

GERTRUDE laughs her beautiful laugh. Her father pulls her
closer to him.

HUGH BELL

Although it hurts when you are not
around...

He makes a pause, looks at FLORENCE, looks at GERTRUDE.

HUGH BELL (CONT'D)

We shall get you out of here.

The image fades slowly, and a big music surges.

INT. ORIENT EXPRESS - DAY

A luxurious compartment. Leather seats, mahogany wood, brass.
GERTRUDE occupies a compartment together with LADY LASCELLES,
her aunt. Two Austrian men sitting with them, dressed already
in white linen suits and wearing pith helmets, although there
is no desert outside, but just the vast plains of the
Hungarian Puszta. One of the characteristic wells passes by,
surrounded by cattle with big horns. The Austrians enshroud
the compartment with the smoke from their pipes.

Huge clouds of black smoke from the locomotive waft into the
landscape. The train whistles.

AUSTRIAN 1

Gib's auf, die sprechen kein
Deutsch.

AUSTRIAN 2

Ich probier es mit Latein.
Fraeulein, verstehen Sie Latein?
Lingua Latina?

GERTRUDE

(playing dumb)
No Latin, sorry.

AUNT LASCELLES

But Gertrude, you do understand
Latin, and German, and French, they
tried it all.

GERTRUDE

Good that they do not understand a
word of English. Would you want to
hear their chatter all the way to
Istanbul?

AUSTRIAN 2

Ah, Istanbul, Turkey. We Vienna -
Baghdad.

AUNT LASCELLES

We London - Istanbul - Teheran.

This ends the attempt at a conversation. GERTRUDE, dressed in
light travel outfit, looks at the landscape.

GERTRUDE

Aunt...Auntie...

AUNT LASCELLES has dozed for a moment.

AUNT LASCELLES

(confused)
Summon the servants.

GERTRUDE

Auntie, we are not in Teheran yet.

AUNT LASCELLES

I must have dreamt of our reception
at the Embassy.

GERTRUDE

I am sorry.

AUNT LASCELLES

It's still a long voyage. From Istanbul we take the steamer through Suez to the Persian Gulf, and from there by train again.

GERTRUDE

But will we have time to see Istanbul?

AUNT LASCELLES

Of course we do.

EXT. ISTANBUL, HAGIA SOPHIA - DAY

The spectacular former church built in the 4th century by Constantine the Great, now a mosque with tall minarets. Behind the maritime divide between Europe and Asia Minor, the Bosphorus. Ships in the distance, pigeons. It is still early in the day, but a sizeable crowd of Turkish men is already bustling. Many of the women are veiled.

GERTRUDE sits at some distance at a vista point, her plate camera next to her on a tripod. But she makes up her mind, and reaches out for her notebook. AUNT LASCELLES notices that GERTRUDE is beginning a sketch.

AUNT LASCELLES

My sister Florence will be upset if we do not send her a photo of the Hagia Sophia.

GERTRUDE

Sometimes I have the feeling I should not just press a button and have a picture.

AUNT LASCELLES

Can I do it? With your camera?

GERTRUDE

Oh, gladly; just go ahead.

AUNT LASCELLES disappears under the black cloth at the back of the bellows of the camera and adjusts the focus.

CUT TO:

EXT. STEAMSHIP, SUEZ CANAL - DAY

The big steamer is moving slowly along the Suez Canal which crosses the barren Egyptian desert.

A mixture of all nations on the deck: Arabs, British soldiers en route to India, Africans squatting next to the deck chairs of Victorian ladies, Lebanese, Greeks, Turks, Hindus in loincloths.

GERTRUDE in the middle of them. Her camera is ready by the railing, but, again, she is not taking a picture. Her aunt is fiddling with a photographic plate she tries to insert.

GERTRUDE

The pyramids. I so much wanted to see the pyramids.

AUNT LASCELLES

Gertrude, if we had left this ship in Suez we would be stuck for the next four weeks in Egypt. I know you would not want that.

GERTRUDE

(quietly enthusiastic)

Oh yes, I would.

AUNT LASCELLES

My dear, I know that you will see the pyramids one day, I just know it.

Having said that, she takes a picture of the rather dull, flat desert. A long-stretched sound of the horn of the steamer wipes out all chatter on deck.

EXT. TRAIN NEAR TEHERAN - DAY

GERTRUDE'S head leans out from an open window of the moving train. She has to hold her straw hat. Her silk shawl is fluttering in the wind.

Her P.O.V

The train approaches the mud walls of Teheran. Barren mountains loom above the mysterious city.

GERTRUDE

Teheran!

Her aunt sticks her head out next to her.

AUNT LASCELLES

Yes, my dear, Teheran.

INT. BRITISH EMBASSY, TEHERAN - EVENING

A big evening reception at the British embassy. FRANK LASCELLES, the newly appointed envoy, is the center of attention. Military attaches, liveried servants, consular staff, ambassadors, counselors, telegraph coders, and Persian dignitaries from the court of the Shah in spirited conversation.

LASCELLES exudes intelligence and an irreverent sense of British humor. He clinks his glass of champagne with a spoon he picks up from the dinner table. Everyone falls silent. A circle of guests forms around him.

LASCELLES

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to introduce Gertrude Lowthian Bell to you. She is a brilliant young scholar, and I am blessed to call her my niece. She is actually the daughter of my wife Mary's sister Florence, and we love her, and I am sure you all will make her stay with us a wonderful experience.

(changing tone)

As to the return of my dear wife: boys, the wild life is over. No more riding on horseback into our dining room...

The guests laugh. They hope for more, and will not be disappointed.

LASCELLES (CONT'D)

...no more drunken orgies on our well-groomed British lawn. No more rescues of damsels in distress. And no more public display of the wildest irreverence towards our beloved Queen Victoria...

He makes an ominous pause.

LASCELLES (CONT'D)

(whispering a secret)

...who I think needs some time here to ween her from her grand design of a PRUDISH Empire. To the BRITISH Empire!

The guests laugh out loud. They know LASCELLES tells the truth. A Minister of the Peacock Throne steps forward. He raises his glass.

MINISTER

(jocular voice)

Excellency! Although such speeches could cost you your career, we will do everything in our power to save you. Even promote you. Cheers!

LASCELLES

Sir! To Persia, the country of five thousand years of poetry!

Applause. The party is instantly in very good mood.

EXT. VERANDAH OF THE EMBASSY - NIGHT

A few guests have strolled out to the spacious verandah which overlooks a very well-groomed lawn. Behind it a pond, roses, and trees with thick foliage. A nightingale sings, warbles ecstatically into the void.

GERTRUDE walks slowly out into the fresh air. She is accompanied by her cousin FLORENCE, a few years younger than her, but more girlish in her demeanor than her age would suggest.

GERTRUDE

The scent, I cannot believe it. And the birds...

COUSIN FLORENCE

...a nightingale. When I cry at night in my pillow, she always makes me feel happy.

GERTRUDE

Isn't she a he? Only the males sing, right?

COUSIN FLORENCE

Oh, don't spoil it.

GERTRUDE feels someone's eyes resting on her. She turns her head slightly and beholds a man standing in the wide open wings of the door, HENRY CADOGAN. He is tall, handsome, rather looking like a poet than an employee of the Embassy. GERTRUDE holds her gaze for a moment, then casts her eyes down. She seems to be struck by the man who is about ten years older than she. COUSIN FLORENCE notices this immediately. Recognizing CADOGAN, she blushes.

Full of confidence, the man walks up to GERTRUDE and introduces himself.

HENRY
My name is Cadogan. Henry Cadogan.
I am...

COUSIN FLORENCE
(quickly)
Henry is the Secretary of the
Embassy.

HENRY
In fact, I am only the Third
Secretary.

He stretches out his hand.

HENRY (CONT'D)
Miss Bell. Welcome at the Embassy
of Her Majesty the Queen.

GERTRUDE
Her Prudish Majesty.

HENRY CADOGAN smiles a discreet smile.

HENRY
I am officially assigned to be your
guardian, and to entertain you.
Anything you need at any time,
please let me know.

COUSIN FLORENCE does not like to hear this, she is unable to
conceal it.

INT. EMBASSY, BILLIARD-ROOM - NIGHT

Some of the guests are playing billiards at four tables. This
room seems to be quite extravagant in size for an Embassy.
HENRY CADOGAN leads GERTRUDE on a tour. COUSIN FLORENCE stays
with both of them.

COUSIN FLORENCE
Oh, Henry, please show us your
trick shot.

HENRY is slightly embarrassed.

HENRY
There is no table free.

COUSIN FLORENCE
Please.

She grabs the cue from one of the players who bows to her. She adopts a girlish tone, like a five year old.

COUSIN FLORENCE (CONT'D)
Oh please! Please-please-please.

Reluctantly, HENRY arranges three balls in a straight line.

HENRY
In fact, I've got two shots.

Some of the guests seem to know; they converge at HENRY'S table.

COUSIN FLORENCE
Show us your Orbit of the Moon.

HENRY hits the ball softly at an unusual angle. It picks up spin and rolls around the obstacle, touching the unreachable ball. Murmurs from the bystanders. GERTRUDE is astonished; she did not expect to find this quality in her guardian.

GERTRUDE
And what's your second trick shot?

COUSIN FLORENCE volunteers.

COUSIN FLORENCE
The Frog Leap.

HENRY arranges the three balls in a straight line again. This time he has to sit at the edge of the table, and leaning over, he hits the ball hard from an almost vertical angle. The ball leaps over its obstacle, picks up a slight back spin and hits the unreachable ball.

Applause from the bystanders. HENRY grins the grin of a mischievous boy. GERTRUDE applauds. She has never seen anything like this.

COUSIN FLORENCE (CONT'D)
Henry, show us your card trick.

But HENRY stays firm this time.

HENRY
(annoyed)
No.

GERTRUDE notices the change of tone. COUSIN FLORENCE is visibly hurt.

EXT. EMBASSY, GARDEN - NIGHT

GERTRUDE, HENRY, and FLORENCE stroll through the garden. They pass the pond. Few guests have ambled out this far. The nightingale is still singing nearby.

HENRY

The pond.

GERTRUDE

Can I swim in it?

HENRY

Miss Bell, I would not advise it.
By night it just looks more
inviting.

He makes a cautious move to shake FLORENCE off. His tone is very friendly.

HENRY (CONT'D)

But Miss Lascelles, you know all of
this so well. Am I not boring you?

COUSIN FLORENCE

No, oh no. No-no-no-no.

To his relief AUNT LASCELLES appears at the verandah, looking for her daughter.

AUNT LASCELLES

(calling)

Florence! Florence, could you
please come over.

COUSIN FLORENCE

Now?

AUNT LASCELLES

The new Italian ambassador has a
present for you.

COUSIN FLORENCE

Henry, I shall come right back.

Without acknowledging GERTRUDE'S presence, she hurries to the main building.

GERTRUDE and HENRY share a secretive glance.

EXT. EMBASSY, ROSE GARDEN - NIGHT

Like in a dream only the Orient can offer, there is a secluded rose garden. A sheer exuberance of roses, overgrowing everything: arches, trellises, a fence. A tame white gazelle rests next to a gurgling spring. The voices of the reception at the embassy have faded. Only the nightingale warbles the soul out of its body.

There is a marble table and a stone bench under a cupola of roses. GERTRUDE is so overwhelmed that she needs to sit down. HENRY, keeping a chivalrous distance, cherishes the moment.

Long silence. GERTRUDE inhales deeply.

GERTRUDE

It's like the Beast's garden, a perfect nightmare of roses.

HENRY smiles.

GERTRUDE'S hands rest on the cool marble of the table. Her fingers stroke softly over the surface of the stone. She can feel an inscription in old Persian characters. Becoming curious, she runs her fingertips along the ornamental script as if it were for the blind.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)

Mr. Cadogan, do you by any chance know what this inscription says?

HENRY, stepping closer. He touches the graph himself with his hand. Their hands almost meet. Almost.

HENRY

It is in Farsi, a medieval form of it.

GERTRUDE

Can you read it?

HENRY

"With them the Seed of Wisdom
Did I sow/ and with my own hand
labour'd it to grow..."

GERTRUDE

(chiming in)

"And this was all the Harvest that
I reap'd/ I came like Water, and
like Wind I go."

They recognize each other with deep, quiet astonishment.

HENRY

Miss Bell, you do know poetry. You know Omar Khayyam.

GERTRUDE

Yes, I do.

A long beat.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)

I want to learn his language.

A quick fade into dark.

INT. EMBASSY, GUEST ROOM - DAY

A well furnished guest room in the Embassy. Gertrude sits at a little desk and writes a letter with her fountain pen. Two huge overseas trunks open in the background. One is not completely empty yet. A built-in wardrobe to her left is still in disarray.

CU on the letter. A fine, fluid handwriting. It starts with "Mother, dearest"

On GERTRUDE'S face. She is concentrated, and she is at ease with herself. We hear her voice.

GERTRUDE'S VOICE

Mother, dearest. I am using the opportunity to send you this with today's diplomatic pouch. My first week has been most precious, and I have started to learn Farsi in order to read the poets in their original.

She pauses.

GERTRUDE'S VOICE (CONT'D)

Mr. Cadogan who works at the embassy is very helpful in this. He is agreeable, intelligent, well read, looking after us, Florence and me, as his special property. I like him.

She pauses again. The whinnying of a horse from outside.

GERTRUDE'S VOICE (CONT'D)

He shall ride with us today though I am told he can't ride in the least...

EXT. STABLES OF THE EMBASSY - DAY

GERTRUDE, HENRY and FLORENCE by the stables. The horses are saddled, held by servants. GERTRUDE wears a riding costume, and HENRY is dressed for the occasion as well. Only FLORENCE in her day dress, tied tightly into a corset. There is protest in her voice.

COUSIN FLORENCE

But Henry, you can't ride.

HENRY

Yes, I can.

COUSIN FLORENCE

What if you fall?

HENRY

It happens to the best.

COUSIN FLORENCE

You will get hurt. I don't like you to ride.

GERTRUDE

Why don't you join us?

COUSIN FLORENCE

I am afraid of horses.

EXT. OPEN DESERT - DAY

From afar. Two dots come rushing to us, and it is more the two long-stretched clouds of dust which give the impression of two furious riders. They rush by. The desert is flat, the desert is vast. Barren mountains far in the North.

GERTRUDE has the lead. She shouts in joy. HENRY, barely hanging on to his saddle, follows courageously.

EXT. RIVER LAR - DAY

The river Lar winds its path in a deep gorge. Torrential waters. Grass on its narrow banks. Two horses, still saddled, are grazing. An eagle soars above in the skies.

GERTRUDE and HENRY are taking a rest on a boulder of rock, flat on its top, resembling an altar jutting out into the swirl of the water. And then, a strange sight: a flock of sheep, swept along by the rapid flow of the river, comes swimming by, followed by four shepherds in peasants' garb.

They are swimming on top of inflated goatskins, a truly ancestral sight.

GERTRUDE

Do they need help?

HENRY

No, not at all. They are the first ones to take their sheep back from the summer pasture in the mountains.

GERTRUDE

Ah yes, I have seen pictures of four thousand year old Babylonian reliefs with men swimming exactly like this on goatskins.

They look at the current of the water. The quiet is only punctuated by a shriek of the eagle.

HENRY

Miss Bell, of all places in the countryside, this is my favorite.

INT. EMBASSY, GUEST ROOM - EVENING

GERTRUDE has taken a shower. When she comes out of her bathroom drying her hair with a towel, she hears something at her door. She stops, quickly closing her robe and tightening the belt. Then there is a clearly distinguishable knock at her door.

GERTRUDE

Who is it?

COUSIN FLORENCE'S VOICE

It's me, Florence.

GERTRUDE opens the door. FLORENCE hurries in. She appears in considerable distress. She stretches out her hand with a letter in it. She makes no introductory remarks.

COUSIN FLORENCE

Here, a letter.

GERTRUDE

A letter? For me?

COUSIN FLORENCE

No, for Henry.

GERTRUDE

You mean, for Mr. Cadogan?

The formal mentioning of his name seems to give her a little bit of relief.

COUSIN FLORENCE

Yes, Henry. Could you please hand him this letter.

GERTRUDE

Why don't you do it yourself?

COUSIN FLORENCE

Oh, I can not.. I CAN NOT.

GERTRUDE

And why is that?

FLORENCE is unable to say it, but she seems to wait for GERTRUDE to encourage her.

COUSIN FLORENCE

Gertrude, from girl to girl...you won't say anything.

GERTRUDE

I won't. Promise.

COUSIN FLORENCE

To no one.

GERTRUDE

To no one, not a soul.

COUSIN FLORENCE

Well, since last year...I mean...

GERTRUDE

Since when?

COUSIN FLORENCE

Since one year, and two months, and eleven days.

GERTRUDE

What? What happened?

COUSIN FLORENCE

I have had a passion for Henry. What did he say to you today? Did he mention me today?

GERTRUDE

Ah, we spoke about shepherds. So why can't you give your letter to Mr. Cadogan?

COUSIN FLORENCE

I just can't. And sending it by mail might cause gossip upon its arrival.

GERTRUDE

Letters?

COUSIN FLORENCE

This year I have written two hundred and two. And what is so terrible, I can't send them.

GERTRUDE

Cousin, darling, I would do almost anything for you. But I cannot fight the battles of your heart.

FLORENCE starts to sob softly. She understands, but she needed to open her heart to someone.

EXT. BAZAAR, TEHERAN - DAY

HENRY leads GERTRUDE and FLORENCE through the bustling bazaar. Stands with spices, with pomegranates, with oranges, with flowers. Others with silken scarves and leather-ware made from camel skin. Incense, pistachio nuts, carpets, riding gear. A din of voices praising their merchandise.

A strange unease between GERTRUDE and FLORENCE which is not unnoticed by HENRY. But they overlay it with feigned merriment.

INT. EMBASSY, GUEST ROOM - NIGHT

GERTRUDE is writing a letter to her father. We hear her soft voice.

GERTRUDE'S VOICE

Father, dearest. I do not know where to begin. The Orient is like a prolonged dream. I am being taken care of wonderfully by auntie, and for all the rest Mr. Cadogan is a fine guide and guardian. He takes care of Florence and me, he shows us lovely things from the bazaars.

(MORE)

GERTRUDE'S VOICE (CONT'D)

He is always there when we want
him, and never when we don't.

Music starts over her voice. GERTRUDE stops, gnawing on her fountain pen. She is lost in thoughts.

INT. EMBASSY, BILLIARD-ROOM - NIGHT

HENRY playing billiard all alone. Quiet, collected. GERTRUDE enters, she approaches with confidence.

HENRY

I stayed up. Miss Bell, I hoped I
would see you.

GERTRUDE

I did not come to play billiard.

HENRY

You came for what?

Something unsaid is lingering between them. GERTRUDE tries to hide behind a joke.

GERTRUDE

I came for your card trick.

They laugh. HENRY leads her to the poker table, inviting her to take a seat. He spreads out a deck of cards, faces up, and quickly selects five red cards, hearts and diamonds, and five black cards, clubs and spades.

HENRY

I shall do the shortcut version of
it. I could use the entire deck...

GERTRUDE

Yes?

He turns the cards around and shuffles them quickly. He places the mini-deck right in front of her.

HENRY

The trick is fiendish, because, as
you will note, from now on I shall
never touch the cards again. You
will do everything.

GERTRUDE

Me?

HENRY looks her in the eye.

HENRY

Miss Bell, I shall cast a spell upon you. And while under this spell, you will know - without looking at the cards, if a card is red, or if it is black.

GERTRUDE

What do I have to do?

HENRY

Just make a pile left for red, and a pile right for black. And you will call out the color, and you will place your card correctly...

GERTRUDE

Without looking at the cards. Well, that's impossible according to the laws of probability.

HENRY

Under my spell the laws do not exist any more.

GERTRUDE accepts the proposition. She takes the first card.

HENRY (CONT'D)

Don't turn it around. Black or red?

GERTRUDE

(guessing)

Black.

HENRY

To the right. Next one?

GERTRUDE

(more confident)

Black.

She puts it to the right. Henry holds his fingertips towards her like a conjurer in a cheap vaudeville show. They both enjoy the challenge.

HENRY

And now?

GERTRUDE

Red.

HENRY

To your left. Next?

GERTRUDE
Black.

HENRY
Next?

GERTRUDE
Red.

HENRY
Next, and next?

GERTRUDE
Black, black. Red, red, red.

She distributes the cards quickly onto their respective piles.

HENRY leans over and turns both piles over with a flourish. Indeed, all cards to the right are black, and all to the left red. GERTRUDE is bedazzled for a moment. She is thinking hard for a moment. We have never seen her frown like this. Then, a sudden insight.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)
But...Mr. Cadogan, you did touch the cards again when you turned them over.

Now it is HENRY'S turn to be astonished.

HENRY
Gertrude, you are very smart. You are the first one to ever notice it.

GERTRUDE
Did you say Gertrude to me, Henry?

HENRY
Yes I did. And did you say Henry to me?

GERTRUDE
Only the walls have ears.

They look at each other. A long beat.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)
And what is your trick after all?

HENRY
Sorry, I won't tell you. But you are very close.

A very quick fade into black.

EXT. PAVILLION IN THE COUNTRYSIDE - DAY

GERTRUDE follows HENRY to a isolated pavillion far out in the vast landscape; they walk, leading their horses on their bridles. Almond trees in the vicinity of what is actually a special palace for Royal Ladies. A servant opens the door.

INT. PAVILLION IN THE COUNTRYSIDE - DAY

An enchanted place. Flowers everywhere, lilies, roses. Water trickles from tiled fountains, little rivulets of water in tiled half-pipes crisscross the interior. Swallows have found a way through an open window, and have built nests along a high ledge. When a swallow flies in, little heads with very large mouths stick up from the nest.

GERTRUDE and HENRY share a moment of enrapture together.

INT. EMBASSY, GUEST ROOM - EVENING

GERTRUDE at her desk, writing. The room is now completely tidy. She has fully settled in. Only a few books are strewn about her bed.

GERTRUDE'S VOICE

Father, dearest. I am finding
myself in the middle of an Arabian
Night...

She pauses. Tries anew, and pauses again. Finally:

GERTRUDE'S VOICE (CONT'D)

Here that which is me...which is
womanlike in me, is an empty jar
that the passerby fills at
pleasure, is filled with such wine
as in England I have never heard
of.

EXT. TOWER OF SILENCE - DAY

Barren mountains. A gusty wind swirls dust into the air and takes it across the plain in front of the steep hills. GERTRUDE and HENRY have left their horses at the foot of a high tower built of stone. No windows, no decorations. Everything is stark. An air of rejection reigns.

Vultures circle over the top platform.

INT. STAIRWAY, TOWER OF SILENCE - DAY

HENRY leads GERTRUDE up the creaky stairway inside the tower. A few bats flutter, sand trickles from above.

HENRY
Gertrude, do you really wish to
climb all the way up?

GERTRUDE
I am prepared.

HENRY
There will be bones, there will be
skulls, and there will be vultures.

EXT. PLATFORM, TOWER OF SILENCE - DAY

They step out into the wind. The platform is strewn with human skulls, vertebrae, pelvis bones, and rib-cages.

HENRY
I told you, this is where the
Zoroastrians leave their dead to
the vultures.

GERTRUDE
I am not afraid.

But she is afraid. Shivering, she leans her body against HENRY'S chest who stands behind her. He puts his arms around her and holds her tight.

HENRY
Miss Gertrude Lowthian Bell, I wish
to kiss you.

A moment of wonder. GERTRUDE turns slowly to him, offering her lips. But HENRY grabs her hand in a sudden inspiration.

HENRY (CONT'D)
Let's get out of here first. Run!

They head for the stairway.

INT. STAIRWAY, TOWER OF SILENCE - DAY

They run down the stairway as if chased by furies. GERTRUDE ahead, HENRY behind her. The stairs creak; a wave of loose sand comes after them.

EXT. TOWER OF SILENCE - DAY

They burst out the door of the forbidding tower. They run the wildest run of their lives.

The plain of hard sand is vast. Their chase is furious. Far out, they finally stop.

Close on GERTRUDE and HENRY. They pant. No way to kiss each other - so much out of breath. They look at each other a long minute. And then, they embrace, and they kiss.

The camera which has been hovering close, as if receiving an electrical jolt, suddenly at the touch of their lips pulls away, and up into the air. Further and further. The landscape is immense, a colossal solitude. But everything is filled with the joy of the lovers who remain a tiny united dot in the landscape.

INT. GUEST ROOM, EMBASSY - DAY

GERTRUDE by her window which faces the park of the Embassy. She seems to be hiding behind the curtain, yet she can see everything out there.

GERTRUDE'S POV. She sees HENRY and FLORENCE near the pond, and it seems obvious that FLORENCE is trying to move him out of sight of the building towards the rose garden. She takes his hand, but he remains placed where he is. There is something firm in his posture. He disentangles his hand cautiously from her's. His posture remains formal. He seems to be saying a few friendly words to her, and suddenly FLORENCE, grabbing her handkerchief, runs away, pressing the kerchief at her eyes.

INT. DINING ROOM, EMBASSY - NIGHT

An intimate dinner with only the ambassador, his wife, FLORENCE, and GERTRUDE present. FLORENCE'S eyes are red and swollen from crying. Silence, an air of unease. A servant in livery takes the plates away. Still silence.

LASCELLES

(gruff)

Florence, stop that moody brooding.

FLORENCE starts sobbing.

FLORENCE

Oh father...

AUNT LASCELLES
(reprimanding tone)
Frank!

LASCELLES
Oh, please, don't Frank-Frank me.

AUNT LASCELLES
She is a girl.

LASCELLES
My dinner table is a no-cry zone!

AUNT LASCELLES
I am sorry that I gave birth to a daughter. You wanted a boy, obviously.

LASCELLES
Absolutely not. You could have borne me a dromedary, and I would not have minded.

Now, his wife is really offended. Big time. LASCELLES is trying to amend, but unfortunately in his way. Turning to his daughter.

LASCELLES (CONT'D)
(conciliatory tone)
Now look, darling: there is a good side about tears. If you cry a lot you need to pee much less.

FLORENCE runs from the table crying out loud, followed by her mother who leaves in a huff.

This leaves GERTRUDE and LASCELLES alone. Silence.

LASCELLES (CONT'D)
(cheerful)
Let's smoke a cigar together.

Quick fade to black.

EXT. RIVER LAR - LATE AFTERNOON

GERTRUDE and HENRY on top of the altar-like rock, his favorite place. Fishing gear is ready, but both are not using it. They are bent over a book of poetry in Farsi.

GERTRUDE
Bread? Piece of Bread?

HENRY
No, Loaf of Bread.

GERTRUDE
Wine. A Flask of Wine?

HENRY
(very proud of her)
Darling, you are doing so well.

GERTRUDE
(proud herself)
"Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath
the Bough/ A Flask of Wine, a Book
of Verse-

HENRY
And Thou/ Beside me singing in the
Wilderness - And Wilderness is
Paradise enow."

GERTRUDE
More, more, more!

HENRY
And look at this Verse: "The Bird
of Time has but a little way/ To
fly-"

GERTRUDE leans her head at his shoulder. A deep sense of
happiness has come over her. His arm is around her shoulder.
They look at the rushing waters of the Lar river.

HENRY nestles in his pocket and produces a silver coin, and
puts it on the rock.

CU. of the coin. It is an ancient coin, cut in two halves
that fit perfectly together.

GERTRUDE
A coin from the time of Alexander
the Great.

HENRY
Two thousand two hundred years are
looking at you.

GERTRUDE
Is this for me?

HENRY
No.

He makes a deliberate pause.

HENRY (CONT'D)
Only half of it. I had a
silversmith cut it in two. One half
for you, and one for me.

GERTRUDE says nothing. She kisses him.

HENRY (CONT'D)
Wherever you are in this world, and
wherever I might be, it will always
be proof that we belong to each
other.

GERTRUDE
Oh, Henry.

HENRY scrambles to his feet, and she is still sitting. For a
moment, both do not know what to do.

Then, HENRY extends his hand and helps her up to her feet.
They face each other. A long beat. HENRY'S voice is so low,
and the rushing river so loud that GERTRUDE barely can hear
him.

HENRY
Gertrude Lowthian Bell, will you
marry me?

GERTRUDE
Did I hear you correctly?

HENRY
Yes, you did.

GERTRUDE
But aren't you supposed to be on
your knees?

They laugh like children. GERTRUDE becomes serious again.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)
Yes, I will.

The image fades quickly into dark.

INT. CORRIDOR, BRITISH EMBASSY - DAY

GERTRUDE, coming from the telegraph room of the Embassy,
bumps into HENRY. Some secretaries with stacks of typed-out
documents are having gossip over a quick cup of coffee. HENRY
bows curtly, totally formal. In public they encrypt their
conversation.

HENRY

Miss Bell, is there anything I can do for you today?

GERTRUDE

Thank you, Mr. Cadogan. I am just waiting on word from my father. I thought there might be a telegram.

HENRY

Very well.

Only an elderly secretary with a particularly stiff corset and a high collar pays attention.

INT. TEA HOUSE IN TEHERAN - EVENING

The cafe is so crowded to the last seat that many guests have standing room only along the walls. Persian intellectuals, students, and a conspicuous amount of women of all ages. But it is not only highly educated people who have gathered. We can make out muscular wrestlers in their robes, shepherds, and a smith who has brought his hammer.

GERTRUDE and HENRY are seated in the middle of the crowd at a table. There is tea in front of them and sticky sweet pastry. A low podium in front where an elderly man with a face that can only be described as biblical recites ancient poetry. The audience accompanies him with their ahs and ohs, with sighs, and laughter, and applause.

The biblical man, close. He recites by heart. He does this with a stunning intensity, sometimes shouting out, then whispering, moving his arms in the air, and then his whisper becomes silence, but his hands are still conducting an imaginary, inaudible, unheard of line.

The audience holds their breath.

HENRY

(whispering)

Firdusi, that was from the poet
Firdusi.

The audience is aghast, then breaks out in applause.

A voice from the audience shouts out a plea.

VOICE

Omar Khayyam!

The biblical man nods. Applause. Then he begins to recite the first few stanzas of a famous poem. HENRY translates for GERTRUDE, but she knows the lines.

HENRY

Ah, my Beloved, fill the Cup that
clears...

GERTRUDE

To-Day of past regrets and future
fears...

INT. COACH, STREETS OF TEHERAN - LATER

GERTRUDE and HENRY in a small coach for two drawn by a rickety horse. They do not pay attention to the bustling life in the streets which springs to life after dusk.

GERTRUDE

I wonder why my father does not
answer back?

HENRY puts his hand on hers.

HENRY

Well, both our letters left by
diplomatic pouch. This is by far
the safest way, but it gets delayed
since all mail has to be sorted out
first at the Foreign Office in
London.

GERTRUDE

Two days ago, I sent a telegram to
my father.

HENRY

A telegram? From the Embassy? Which
means everyone knows by now.

GERTRUDE

No, I only wrote: "have you sent an
answer?" But there was nothing.
Nothing. I hope my father is not
ill or worse. I am worried.

INT. CORRIDOR, BRITISH EMBASSY - AFTERNOON

GERTRUDE is with the telegram dispatcher, a young military man who discreetly puts his manual of encryptions out of her sight.

DISPATCHER

Miss Bell, I am sorry. There is no telegram today either.

GERTRUDE

(timidly)

Maybe later in the afternoon.

The stiff secretary whom we have seen in the corridor before sticks her head in the door.

SECRETARY

Young lady, it is almost midnight in England. How do you think a post office is still working? And besides, the dispatch room is a classified area, for personnel only.

INT. EMBASSY, GUEST ROOM - DAY

GERTRUDE tries to read, but she puts the book away quickly. She leafs through another one without paying attention. A knock at her door.

GERTRUDE

Who is it?

DISPATCHER

McInally, From the dispatch room.

Gertrude hurries to open the door. The young man salutes militarily.

DISPATCHER (CONT'D)

I don't have a telegram. But I noticed that the mail room had this for you. I knew you were waiting.

The DISPATCHER leaves. GERTRUDE opens the letter quickly. She still stands in the open door. She reads quickly, leaning against the door frame. Then, with a vacant expression, she slowly slides down along the frame. She sits for a long moment with her chin resting on her knees. Her heart is dead.

EXT. ROSE GARDEN, EMBASSY - MORNING

GERTRUDE and HENRY under the cupola of roses. Both very quiet, they must have spoken for a long time. They listen to the warbling of birds. The albino gazelle stands very still next to GERTRUDE.

When the delicate animal nudges her elbow softly with its moist nostrils, as if on cue, GERTRUDE starts to cry.

HENRY puts his hand on hers.

GERTRUDE
(bravely)
I shall return home. I must speak
with my father.

HENRY quietly places half of the silver coin on the marble table. A brief moment later, GERTRUDE does the same.

CU coin halves. GERTRUDE pushes her half softly until the pieces fit together.

INT. ROUNTON GRANGE, LIBRARY - EVENING

Warm light from the flickering fireplace. HUGH BELL in a leather armchair; his daughter GERTRUDE sits on his knees the way she must have done it when she was little. A pause. They must have talked for a while already.

HUGH BELL
His credentials are not impressive.

GERTRUDE
But father...

HUGH BELL
Do you have an idea how little a
junior diplomat earns?

GERTRUDE
I could live in a tent with the man
I am in love with.

HUGH BELL
What I found out, and what you may
not know...

GERTRUDE
I know everything about him.

HUGH BELL
What you probably don't know is
that he is a gambler. He has
accumulated significant debts.

GERTRUDE
When you started your steel mill
you were deeply in debt.

This does not fly with her father.

HUGH BELL

My answer remains: no. I do not
give my consent to this childish
plan.

EXT. ROUNDTON GRANGE, PARK - DAY

GERTRUDE has set up a table next to the pond. Reeds sway in the wind, frogs croak. She has a pile of papers on the table held by her teacup and stones against the breeze. A big dictionary and the original text of the poems of Hafiz which she is translating into English.

GERTRUDE'S VOICE

The nightingale with drops of his
heart's blood/ Had nourished the
red rose, then came a wind/...

The image fades slowly.

EXT. ROUNDTON GRANGE, PARK - DAY

The table is the same, the pond, the forest in the distance, but time has passed. It is autumn, the leaves of the trees have changed color. Wind is blowing. Rain clouds in the skies. GERTRUDE, wrapped in a woolen shawl is still working on her translation.

GERTRUDE'S VOICE

And catching at the boughs in
envious mood/ A hundred thorns
about his heart entwined.

From the manor of Roundton Grange two figures approach. Coming closer, we recognise HUGH BELL and FLORENCE.

They stop at GERTRUDE'S table. Looking up from her work, she instantly recognizes half the silver coin in her father's open hand. All color in her face disappears.

GERTRUDE

No.

She struggles to control her emotions. HUGH BELL opens a folded letter.

HUGH BELL

This came by diplomatic pouch from
Teheran.

(MORE)

HUGH BELL (CONT'D)

The letter says that the coin, the fishing gear, and the clothes of Henry Cadogan were found neatly arranged on a protruding rock by the Lar river.

A beat. He puts his hand on her shoulder.

HUGH BELL (CONT'D)

Cadogan's body was found a mile down river the following day. The embassy regrets to inform you of this tragic accident.

GERTRUDE, seemingly collected, stands up. Her gaze does not meet the eyes of her parents.

GERTRUDE

It was no accident.

She clutches half the coin in her hand. Her heart is not beating any more.

FLORENCE

Darling, shall we leave you alone?

GERTRUDE nods. They leave. There is a rustling in the reeds at the pond. She notices it and turns towards the pond.

We see GERTRUDE now from behind. The pond, the forest, the clouds. Silence.

GERTRUDE'S VOICE

Light of mine eyes and harvest of
my heart/ And mine at last in
changeless memory!/ Ah, when he
found it easy to depart,/ He left
the harder pilgrimage to me!/ Oh
Camel-driver though the cordage
start,/ For God's sake help me lift
the fallen load,/ And Pity be my
comrade of the road!/ My face is
seamed with dust, mine eyes are
wet./ Of dust and tears the
turquoise firmament/ Kneadeth the
bricks for joy's abode: and yet.../
I had not castled, and the time is
gone./ What shall I play? Upon the
chequered floor/ Of Night and Day,
Death won the game...

Slowly, very slowly, GERTRUDE sinks to the ground. The image fades.

The murmur of voices. The image fades back, revealing a pile of books on a table. We recognize the title in CU.

THE SELECTED POEMS OF HAFIZ, translated by Gertrude Lowthian Bell.

INT. LIBRARY, HALL - EVENING

The ornate hall of the London Public Library is filled with guests. GERTRUDE'S publisher has arranged a sumptuous reception for the publication of GERTRUDE'S translation. Champagne, servants in liveries, festive mood. The publisher, a distinguished looking elderly gentleman, makes an announcement.

PUBLISHER

Ladies and gentlemen, Miss Bell has been kind enough to offer signing of your copies of her translation of Hafiz...

GERTRUDE takes her seat at the table with the pile of copies of her book. A line of guests has formed to get her autograph.

GUEST I

Congratulations for the reviews!
Could you sign this for Thomas?

GERTRUDE signs the book almost mechanically.

GUEST II

Miss Bell, I have read all translations of Hafiz, but there has never been a better one...

GERTRUDE

For whom shall I sign it?

GUEST II

Could you please write: Happy anniversary Lisa and Wilbur. We are married for three years tomorrow.

GERTRUDE

Best of luck!

She seems to be devoid of all emotions as she writes the dedication. A quick fade.

A caption appears: THREE YEARS LATER

EXT. SWISS ALPS, FINSTERAARHORN - DAY

A preternatural panorama of the Swiss Alps. A clear summer day, but despite the beautiful weather the Finsteraarhorn mountain in the center looks dark and menacing. The peak rises as a spectacle of rock and ice; its North face exudes dark danger.

GERTRUDE in mountaineer's outfit sits on a wooden log and scrutinizes the mountain through her binoculars. Next to her two mountain guides, the brothers ULRICH and ALOIS ODERMATT, young men with sharp, tanned features. Even seated, they look very strong. They have hemp ropes coiled around their shoulders. On their coarse rucksacks they have their ice-axes and steel crampons fixed with leather straps.

ULRICH

Lady Gertrude, to the left of the summit, do you see the promontory?

GERTRUDE

Ah, I know it only too well. I almost lost three toes in the ice-storm there last year.

ALOIS

The Alpine Club has given it your name: GERTRUDE'S PEAK.

ULRICH

This is forever. You were the first on it.

GERTRUDE

(with self-irony)

Now I am a Person, at least in Switzerland.

She laughs. Her laughter is not as contagious as we have heard it, but she seems to be renewed in this environment.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)

Are we scaling the North face?

ULRICH

That's too dangerous.

ALOIS

That would be reckless.

GERTRUDE

But that's the beauty to be the first. Nobody has tried it.

ALOIS
Well, well, well...

GERTRUDE
No wells, no buts, no ifs...we
shall tackle it tomorrow morning.

EXT. FINSTERAARHRON, NORTH FACE - EARLY MORNING

A narrow couloir. Scree is sliding and tumbling, its echo hollow, coming back from the almost vertical rock face. GERTRUDE and her two GUIDES are climbing steadily, methodically. She is on a rope between the two brothers.

Later in the day. A precipitous slab of rock with only a few fissures to hammer a peg with an iron clamp into it. The hemp rope runs through it, and from above ULRICH is belaying GERTRUDE who is clambering along the fissure. ALOIS is not visible further down, but he is keeping contact with his brother.

ALOIS VOICE
Safe?

ULRICH
Yes, safe. Belaying.

GERTRUDE
How does it look up there?

ULRICH
Bad.

GERTRUDE places her steel crampons with great caution, step by slow step.

EXT. FINSTERAARHORN, ROCK LEDGE - DAY

The three climbers have reached a six foot wide ledge. They pause and eat. Bread, smoked ham, a drink from a canteen. Their dialogue is even more reduced to the essentials than before.

ULRICH
See?

GERTRUDE
What?

ULRICH
The clouds.

ALOIS
From the west.

ULRICH
That's bad.

ALOIS
Very bad.

GERTRUDE
Let's move on. Quickly.

EXT. FINSTERAARHORN, ROCK FACE - DAY

Clouds are rushing in, dark and fast. Gusts of wind. The rock dangerous, almost vertical. The climbers hardly make any progress.

ULRICH
We have to turn back.

GERTRUDE
Now?

ULRICH
Yes, now!

As if he needed an assertion, a lightning and an instantaneous, deafening thunderclap. Cold rain whips almost horizontally into the rock face.

The climbers start descending, ULRICH abseiling from above, ALOIS rappelling the second half of the rope. In imminent danger, they are as good as any guides can be.

EXT. FINSTERAARHORN, CRAG - EVENING

The climbers have found shelter in a crag, not more than four feet wide. They huddle together with the storm raging outside. Lightning after lightning; the thunder does not cease.

GERTRUDE'S ice ax suddenly develops a strange, electric aura. ALOIS noticing it rips the ax from her hand, and tosses it into the void. The moment it is airborne, lightning strikes the flying steel.

Instantly, the two brothers get rid of their axes as well.

ULRICH
Lady Gertrude, that was that.

ALOIS

We can not move from here.

ULRICH

We must stay the night here.

ALOIS

In the morning we shall try to descend.

GERTRUDE

Do we have a chance to get out of here alive? Without ice-axes?

ALOIS

If we have a chance, we have a chance.

ULRICH

If not, not.

ULRICH takes GERTRUDE'S frozen hands and squeezes them under his armpits. No more words. Slowly, darkness descends. In the darkness,

GERTRUDE'S VOICE

I should not be here. I know now where I belong.

EXT. JORDANIAN DESERT - DAY

As if floating on pulsing, shifting water, a small caravan comes in focus. In fact, in this desert, in this heat, nothing is focused unless fairly close to us. Islands appear to be floating as mirages above the fluctuating strata of heated air. A big music sets in.

The caravan, eight dromedaries and six riders, is moving slowly, steadily. The movement is reminiscent of animals ambling, strolling, but soon we understand that they move with great purpose, covering vast distances this way.

At the head rides FATTUH, a middle-aged Arab together with a young guide, ABDULLAH, followed by a figure who seems to blend in perfectly. The rider, his leg casually placed on the neck of his animal, arranges the hat and the cloth covering his face, and suddenly we recognise GERTRUDE. She is wearing a pistol at her belt. Her face serene, her posture casual, but in a way exuding nobility. She is followed by two mounted servants and two pack animals.

The caravan passes and loses itself in the enormity of silence, and space, and undulating heat.

A distant noise from the direction the caravan appeared; the camera pans back, and makes out a big cloud of dust and sand. Quickly, riders in full gallop emerge from the dust. About twelve soldiers in Turkish cavalry uniforms are in hot pursuit of the caravan. They follow the tracks of the camels, whipping their horses who are wet with sweat and foaming at their flanks.

EXT. JORDANIAN DESERT, WADI - DAY

GERTRUDE'S caravan is descending into a dry, vast riverbed. Suddenly, the Turkish posse catches up with the camels. The soldiers circle the small caravan, firing rifle shots into the air. An excited young cavalry lieutenant signals everyone to dismount. He approaches GERTRUDE.

LIEUTENANT
(collecting his breath)
You are under arrest. All of you
are under arrest.

GERTRUDE
(calmly)
Effendi, salaam to you. Salaam
aleikum.

LIEUTENANT
Aleikum asalaam.

This already has a slight calming effect on him.

GERTRUDE
Your horses need rest. They need to
be watered.

The young LIEUTENANT ignores this.

LIEUTENANT
Who allowed you to leave in the
middle of the night without a
permit by the authorities?

GERTRUDE
Effendi, there must be a
misunderstanding...

FATTUH steps forward; he assumes an unexpected role.

FATTUH
We do have a permit.

LIEUTENANT
You! Who are you?

FATTUH

I am Fattuh, the servant of Miss Bell.

LIEUTENANT

Miss Gertrude Bell, I know who you are. I have to ask you for your weapon.

While GERTRUDE calmly hands over her revolver, FATTUH nestles at her saddlebag. He produces a paper and hands it to the officer.

The paper, close. It is in Turkish script and contains several seals, stamps, and signatures. It looks very official.

The LIEUTENANT reads it quickly, and then salutes the paper. His tone changes; he seems to be embarrassed.

LIEUTENANT (CONT'D)

This document comes directly...

FATTUH

Effendi, you are right. It comes directly from Istanbul, directly from the Ministry.

LIEUTENANT

(ignoring him)

Miss Bell, I am so sorry. I had a cable from our headquarters in Amman...

GERTRUDE

Ah, lieutenant, Amman just was not notified by your government. The ways of bureaucracy are labyrinthine, it is exactly the same in London with the Foreign Office.

LIEUTENANT

(relieved)

Is that so?

He politely hands GERTRUDE'S pistol and the permit back.

GERTRUDE

Lieutenant, give your horses some rest and share a moment with us.

EXT. JORDANIAN DESERT, WADI - TOWARDS EVENING

GERTRUDE'S caravan and the small Turkish cavalry detachment are resting in the wadi. A small fire of dried camel dung, black coffee, dried dates, relaxed mood. GERTRUDE, separate from the others, is fiddling at her saddle-bag without doing anything for real. FATTUH is strolling by, and stops.

GERTRUDE
(whispering)
Where did you get the permit?

FATTUH
(whispering)
I know this scribe at the main mosque in Amman, he can forge anything for a good baksheesh.

Back at the tiny, smoldering campfire. GERTRUDE and FATTUH join the Turkish soldiers. Offering a small tin cup of coffee to the LIEUTENANT.

GERTRUDE
You came from the garrison at the railway station?

LIEUTENANT
Yes, Lady.

GERTRUDE
How much cavalry is stationed there?

LIEUTENANT
About sixty. But the numbers are dwindling. We were a hundred in April.

GERTRUDE
Artillery?

LIEUTENANT
All gone. I should not tell you that.

GERTRUDE
I am just a traveller, a scientist, and if you read the papers you would know like everyone else that the forces of the Ottoman Empire are somewhat overstretched. It is all officially in the papers.

LIEUTENANT
(slightly suspicious)
But my outpost is not in the
papers.

GERTRUDE, understanding that she is moving into dangerous terrain, makes her evasive move.

GERTRUDE
Fattuh. Fetch my camera.

She turns toward the LIEUTENANT.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)
Lieutenant, I would like to offer
you a photo, you and your men, and
I shall not carry a military secret
with me...

LIEUTENANT
Yes?

GERTRUDE
I would like to give you the
exposed negative, and you can have
it developed in Amman, it will be
all yours.

LIEUTENANT
Lady Bell, you are very kind.

With a certain pride, the LIEUTENANT lines up his men who hold their horses by their reigns. GERTRUDE has put up her tripod and is focusing the photographic plate under a black cloth.

GERTRUDE
Please hold still for a while, the
sun is almost down, but the light
is beautiful.

We see the detachment of cavalry standing still for a long moment, facing the camera. The image fades.

EXT. JORDANIAN DESERT, WADI - NIGHT

Night has fallen over the desert. The wadi is illuminated by a few kerosene lights and a dome of brilliant stars, seemingly so close and brilliant that one feels like stretching out one's hand and harvesting them. The camels rest. The Turkish cavalry is gone.

FATTUH has set up GERTRUDE'S tent, a fairly large canvas construction, and next to it another tent for her equipment. It also contains a bathtub set up with wooden poles and a canvas tub. FATTUH commands two of his men who carry water in sealed goatskins.

FATTUH
Your water, Lady Bell.

GERTRUDE
No. We should not waste water now
without knowing if the next well
isn't dry.

FATTUH
Oh Benevolent, I thank you for
giving me a master who understands
the ways of the desert.

EXT. JORDANIAN DESERT, WADI MUJIB GORGE - DAY

The caravan has reached an abrupt cliff. Rocks are towering from the desert plains, behind them further East high mountains. A barren, utterly dramatic landscape. The gorge of Wadi Mujib is carved into the rocks, as if a monstrous saw had cut a crag into the red rock. Fresh water flows along the bottom of the gorge, clear and ankle deep.

GERTRUDE is mapping the terrain. She has a theodolite on a tripod aiming at FATTUH who holds a stick with markings at a distance of some hundred feet.

GERTRUDE
Distance?

FATTUH
One hundred and twenty.

GERTRUDE
Angle?

FATTUH
Fifty-two.

GERTRUDE
Thank you.

She notes the position down in a neatly kept column of measurements. Judging from the amount of collected data, she must have done this for quite some time.

FATTUH
Mecca is this way.

He points straight in the direction of the gorge.

EXT. WADI MUJIB - DAY

The walls of the gorge are only twenty feet apart and tower hundreds of feet up. Colored stripes of sandstone, dramatic cliffs. At some points high up the walls almost touch each other. A man could jump across. Swallows zig-zag in confused patterns in the gorge, their shrill cries echoing hundredfold.

GERTRUDE, FATTUH, and ABDULLAH are wading in the crystal clear water until they reach a deeper pond in the curve of the canyon. GERTRUDE dips down into the fresh water, fully dressed, and lets the river flow around her body. Tiny fish are nibbling at her fingers. She enjoys letting herself be enveloped in primordial nature.

FATTUH

Abdullah says that at the end of the wadi there are flint tools from Stone Age people.

GERTRUDE

Let's go there.

FATTUH

But it is a steep climb.

GERTRUDE

I have been a climber in my former life.

EXT. END OF WADI MUJIB - DAY

It is hard to imagine that people ever had an outpost at such an unreachable place. From an overhang of a rock the gorge descends almost vertically. ABDULLAH is cautiously sifting through splinters of rock and hands some specimens to GERTRUDE. FATTUH is worried, trying to secure the precarious perch from a step further below.

ABDULLAH is an eighteen year old Bedouin with fine features and fine hands. He has discovered something.

ABDULLAH

Lady Bell, this looks like a spearhead.

GERTRUDE

(examining)

Yes. I think you are right.

FATTUH

How old do you believe it to be?

GERTRUDE

Ten thousand years, maybe fifteen.
Who knows. It needs to be examined.

ABDULLAH

Why have our ancestors lived here?

GERTRUDE

This looks like a defensible place.
We can be certain that there were
raids, that there were wars.

FATTUH

Wars? No that cannot be. At that
early time the world was Paradise.

GERTRUDE

The world was never Paradise. We
have failed as humans.

ABDULLAH frowns. He puts all the dignity of a nomad of the
desert into his voice.

ABDULLAH

The Lady is wrong. The Lady should
be reminded that the Prophet,
blessed be His Name, has promised
us the Paradise. The Paradise has
no time, no age, no dwelling place.
It has been forever, it has been
everywhere. It awaits us.

FATTUH

If we live a righteous life.

EXT. MOUNTAINS NEAR PETRA, JORDAN - DAY

Wild mountains, barren landscape. Sandstone cliffs,
precipices, a narrow valley winds along dramatic rocks. The
sun is still low, it has not reached the bottom of the gulch.

Left and right are graves, small temples, and mausoleums
carved into the rock. Some of the ancient architecture is
used by shepherds as dwellings for men and goats. Fireplaces
from inside a mausoleum have blackened the rock. A few fences
built of thorny twigs are connected to a row of columns which
are also carved directly out of the stone of the precipice.

GERTRUDE'S caravan is packing up. The camels sit on the ground and moan in aversion against the men who are putting loads on them. The animals are mean. One of them tries to bite a camel driver who is watchful enough to lash out with a switch.

GERTRUDE is still taking a few photos of a mausoleum, but she knows that she better hurry.

FATTUH

The Lady is running late.

GERTRUDE

Yes, Fattuh, I know it will be a hot day. Will we reach the British camp?

FATTUH

Only if the Lady is ready to decide to saddle up.

GERTRUDE

(laughing)

You said that well. I am coming.

EXT. ARCHAEOLOGICAL CAMP, PETRA - TOWARDS EVENING

A vast necropolis in a theater of rock. Graves carved out of the sandstone cliffs, a small, dilapidated temple, columns, engraved inscriptions. A few small mud houses, some of them inhabited, but most in a state of dilapidation. Two men are standing with their backs to the camera. They are awaiting the approaching caravan lead by ABDULLAH. The camels stop and sit down, lowering themselves on their knees, and letting their rumps down in a separate, second movement.

GERTRUDE unwraps her keffiyeh and makes her face visible for the two men, THOMPSON and LAWRENCE.

THOMPSON

Welcome, Miss Bell. I am Campbell Thompson, and this is my colleague...

LAWRENCE

Lawrence. T.E Lawrence.

GERTRUDE

T.E. Standing for what?

LAWRENCE

Thomas Edward. I hate both names,
they are an abomination. Please,
call me just Lawrence.

They shake hands. GERTRUDE stretches her limbs after a day-long ride, and has a moment to examine the two young men. THOMPSON is in his thirties, tall, thinning hair. His steel rimmed glasses emphasize his appearance of an academic. LAWRENCE is twenty three, but still looks like a boy from high school. Watery, intense blue eyes, a shock of blond hair over his sunburnt forehead. He is dressed in gaudy style, half Arab, half British. He has an Oriental tasseled belt tied around his Harris tweed jacket with a dagger in a silver sheath from Damascus stuck in it, and a keffiyeh tied around his neck. He looks intensely gay.

LAWRENCE (CONT'D)

We knew you were coming.

GERTRUDE

But I have not sent messengers.

LAWRENCE

A myriad of stars see you at night,
and during day the rustling sand
announces your footsteps.

THOMPSON

He is always like this.

GERTRUDE

Lawrence, what is a schoolboy like
you doing here?

LAWRENCE laughs wildly; he likes GERTRUDE'S blunt ways.
THOMPSON steps in with an explanation.

THOMPSON

He has a Ph.D in archaeology.

LAWRENCE

Gertrude, if I may call you by your
first name...

GERTRUDE

You may.

LAWRENCE

This Ph.D from Oxford - which in
vain I want to leave me - keeps
following me like the wafting of an
old spinster's fart.

He roars a strange roar of a laughter.

LAWRENCE (CONT'D)

In fact, I know only little about
medieval pottery shards.

GERTRUDE and LAWRENCE seem to develop an instantaneous
interest for each other.

EXT. MUD HOUSE, VERANDAH- NIGHT

THOMPSON and LAWRENCE inhabit a two-room mud house which
opens up to a verandah. The rooms are overflowing with chaos.
Papers strewn about, dirty socks on a table next to them,
clothes, riding gear, spades and photographic equipment.

Outside, a few wooden planks serve as a low table, and there
are no chairs, but camel saddles against which the two
archaeologists and GERTRUDE are leaning. LAWRENCE, rather
sprawling in vulgar repose, smokes a naghil, an oriental
water-pipe which interrupts their dialogue with its bubbling
noise. In the background, FATTUH hurries his men to unload
the camels and pitch camp.

LAWRENCE

This place is a dump. Everything
has been removed by grave robbers,
over and over again. We are stuck
here.

THOMPSON

Lawrence is dreaming of great
treasures, gold hoards...

LAWRENCE

At least, Lord Almighty, give us a
whole library of clay tablets from
Babylonian times, the likes the
Germans have excavated in
Mesopotamia.

GERTRUDE

We are no match for their new
excavation methods.

LAWRENCE

True, Gertrude, darling...

GERTRUDE

Darling?

LAWRENCE bends over with a roar of laughter.

LAWRENCE

You know, I made a big mistake by wearing this belt.

THOMPSON

This kind of belt is worn only by bachelors.

GERTRUDE

And?

LAWRENCE

The local villagers of our excavation workers have tried to find me a wife. Imagine, a wife for me, how horrible.

GERTRUDE musters him. LAWRENCE sucks noisily at his water-pipe.

LAWRENCE (CONT'D)

They have heard of your arrival, and an instant rumor spread that you were my bride, sent from England.

GERTRUDE

(jokingly)

Lawrence, I am still eligible.

LAWRENCE

(serious)

I think the right man for you has not been born yet.

The thought lingers for a moment. LAWRENCE sips tea. He tries to bring the conversation back to their business.

LAWRENCE (CONT'D)

The Germans...they are the danger. Since they built the railway all the way from Berlin to Baghdad, they can support their teams with the most modern technology for their excavation sites. And because of the railway they are a real challenge for the British interests in the region.

GERTRUDE

And they are siding with the Turks.
I cannot imagine that the Ottoman
Empire can last much longer, to me
it looks like the late Roman Empire
shortly before its collapse.

LAWRENCE

And what's coming then?

GERTRUDE

Chaos. Chaos and war.

LAWRENCE

But the British Empire will take
over, will fill the void of power.

GERTRUDE

I beg to differ.

LAWRENCE

Yes?

GERTRUDE

It will be the Arabs whose spirit
of nationhood will emerge. They are
the future.

LAWRENCE

Gertrude, I think the same way.
However, as an archaeologist I have
to think in terms of centuries, of
millennia. It may take a century,
or two, or three until the Arabs
emancipate themselves, until they
rise to their autonomies.

THOMPSON has become increasingly nervous. He gets up and
returns from the mud-house with a bottle of whiskey.

THOMPSON

Enough of that. We are
archaeologists.

GERTRUDE

Well, so far I am only a traveler.

THOMPSON

To the travelers. To those who dig
up mysteries under the surface.

He takes a swig.

LAWRENCE

Sorry, we have no glasses.

GERTRUDE grabs the bottle and takes a very big swig.

LAWRENCE (CONT'D)

You know what, Gertrude? With a veil on, and the benign soft glow of the campfire as your backlight, and a good Scotch in your fist - you do make a terrific bride.

LAWRENCE roars. GERTRUDE and THOMPSON chime in. This is a good meeting in the desert.

EXT. GERTRUDE'S CAMPSITE - MORNING

Morning activity at the campsite near the excavations. The camels are being watered and baggage is tied into bundles. FATTUH commands his men with short orders, he is completely in charge.

Tribal women and young girls have gathered at GERTRUDE'S tent. They are standing as a silent wall. When GERTRUDE emerges they do not budge. A little girl, about five years old, approaches boldly and feels her hair. GERTRUDE allows the curious little one to marvel about her blonde hair. Whispers among the women. A young woman giggles, and is immediately silenced by the older ones.

LAWRENCE approaches with long strides, full of energy.

LAWRENCE

Gertie, have you had breakfast yet?

GERTRUDE

No, for God's sake, I've got a hangover.

LAWRENCE enjoys the admission. He becomes really loud.

LAWRENCE

You should stay with us. I have a secret stash of Scotch!

GERTRUDE

Oh, please, do not talk so loud, my head! I've got a headache, a Roman Empire size headache.

LAWRENCE

What a shame that we do not have
Rome set on fire, and the emperor
Nero singing a song to the lyre
bemoaning the catastrophe he
started for getting into the right
mood. I miss those days.

GERTRUDE

Keep your voice down.

LAWRENCE

Gertie, I wish you could stay with
us. Now the local women might start
again to wed me off.

GERTRUDE

I shall kiss you in front of
everyone. Can you take that?

LAWRENCE

Absolutely.

GERTRUDE

My kiss shall liberate you.

She kisses LAWRENCE on both cheeks. The local women whisper
in awe.

LAWRENCE

(whispering)

Gertie, will you please NOT marry
me.

GERTRUDE

(imitating his voice)

Absolutely.

EXT. JORDANIAN DESERT - MORNING

A pulsing sun deep at the horizon, rising quickly. GERTRUDE'S
caravan is on the move. The riders are stoic. Only the young
guide, ABDULLAH, sings quietly. Flat terrain, hard sand,
interspersed with white patches of salt, an enormous expanse
of space.

GERTRUDE on camelback, calm and collected, as if she had been
in this life for years. She has rendered herself to the
solitude of the desert.

EXT. YERASH, ROMAN RUINS - DAY

A vast archaeological site which does not look like an average dig for foundations along search trenches. The ruins of Yerash are like a vast Roman city almost fully preserved. An entrance gate, cobblestone streets, two wide semicircles of tall columns which surround the market place; palaces, temples in the background on a hill. A group of archaeologists is working there.

GERTRUDE, assisted by FATTUH, takes photos. Her camera is very low, looking along the deeply carved tracks of ancient carts in the massive cobblestones. Arches and columns left and right.

From the hill in the distance, a tall man, KOLDEWEY, approaches. He stops next to GERTRUDE who interrupts her work.

KOLDEWEY

Miss Bell, we have a scientific dispute up there at the Temple of Jupiter. We need someone with fresh eyes.

GERTRUDE

Dr. Koldewey, I am not more than an amateur so far.

KOLDEWEY

That may be a great advantage.

EXT. YERASH, TEMPLE OF JUPITER

A small group of archaeologists have assembled at the outer line of columns of the biggest temple in the entire precinct. Nearby, local workers have interrupted their work on a Roman mosaic which is still mostly covered with sand. They all stare at one of the columns. The heat of the day has created some wind.

KOLDEWEY, and GERTRUDE approach. FATTUH follows them, curious himself.

KOLDEWEY

Now, this is our big question...

Everybody freezes in anticipation, only GERTRUDE still walks a few hesitant steps.

KOLDEWEY (CONT'D)

Miss Bell, would you please stand still, completely still, and listen.

They all listen. Nothing. Then a slight gust of wind makes the column groan.

KOLDEWEY (CONT'D)

Can you hear it?

GERTRUDE

The sound from the column?

KOLDEWEY

Yes. Our local workers call this temple the Sigh of the Gods, and we are asking ourselves: does the column sigh because the heat expands the carved stones? Or does the column sway...move in the wind? My colleague, Dr. Winter is convinced...

A young, intelligent man steps forward.

WINTER

...that the column possibly leans to the side. If it does, it is too small an inclination for any measurement. We tried everything.

FATTUH starts to inspect the column. Between the massive drums of marble, piled up to create an impressive column, are fissures carved by millennia of wind and weather.

GERTRUDE

Could it be that the expansion of the heat makes the stones groan, the same way the Memnon colossus in Upper Egypt moans when the heat of the day warms the statue of the pharaoh?

KOLDEWEY

Maybe. We have discussed this.

WINTER

However, our observation is that there is a clear coincidence of air movement and the sounds from the column.

KOLDEWEY
A gigantic harp?

WINTER
No, movement. The column bends. It sways.

Unexpectedly, FATTUH chimes in.

FATTUH
Lady, does any one of the gentleman have a fork or a spoon?

They all turn in surprise to him.

KOLDEWEY
No, not really. We work with scientific tools.

But one of the workers at the mosaic produces a spoon from his pocket.

FATTUH
And a sharp stone. I need a small wedge of a stone, about the size of my thumbnail.

Now, the archaeologists become really curious. FATTUH inspects a few splinters of stone that are handed to him.

CU. He approaches the column and puts the handle of the spoon into the column as deep as the crack allows. Then, he supports the handle with a little stone wedge only a few millimeters away from its stuck-in end. Thus, he creates a lever with the balance point extremely close to the end of the spoon.

He steps back. All heads move in to watch his contraption.

FATTUH (CONT'D)
Inshallah, there will be a wind.

As if on cue, a gust of wind swirls dust into the air and reaches the column. The column groans.

CU of the spoon. Clearly visible, the ladle of the spoon sticking into the air makes an up and down movement.

FATTUH (CONT'D)
The spoon nods.

KOLDEWEY

Indeed. Fantastic. The tiniest of shift between the parts of the column translates into a visible movement.

WINTER

Miss Bell, who is your servant?

GERTRUDE

(proud)

His name is Fattuh. He was recommended to me in Amman.

KOLDEWEY

Could we keep him?

GERTRUDE

For no money in the world.

FATTUH does not want to show how proud this makes him. He simply turns toward the sun.

FATTUH

Allah. Oh Benevolent. Oh Merciful.

The image fades slowly.

INT. DAMASCUS, OFFICE OF THE BRITISH CONSUL GENERAL - DAY

The office of the consul is only sparsely furnished, but there are bookshelves covering three of the four walls. Books have spilled over to the floor, piles of them. The few remaining spots on the fourth wall are filled with detailed maps of Syria, Arabia, and Mesopotamia.

The door to the reception room opens, and we catch a glimpse of a few desks. Several secretaries are working there. They hammer away on typewriters. One of them leads GERTRUDE into the office of Major CHARLES DOUGHTIE-WYLIE, the British Consul General.

SECRETARY

Miss Bell.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE, a virile looking man with hawk-like features, about forty years of age, rises from his chair.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

Welcome. Please take a seat.

GERTRUDE sits down. She has no handbag or any papers on her. Her face shows that she has been exposed to sun and desert for months. Her tan suits her very well. She has changed into a mature, womanly woman.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE (CONT'D)

Before we talk business, allow me to congratulate you on your feat to elude the Turkish authorities.

GERTRUDE

I had a "permit", if you know what I mean.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

How did you forge it?

GERTRUDE

It was not me, it was a scribe at the Umayyad Mosque. They are the finest. In fact, it was a servant of mine who contacted him. If you ever need a Turkish document...

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

The British Empire has no need for such petty tricks.

He makes a meaningful pause.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE (CONT'D)

Except printing millions of counterfeit Deutsch Mark and Turkish piasters in order to undermine their economies.

GERTRUDE laughs. Her laughter is almost as clear and beautiful as we have heard it years before. DOUGHTIE-WYLIE leans over, encouraging her to explain herself.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE (CONT'D)

Well?

GERTRUDE

Let me put it directly. I have plans to travel to the Jebel Druze.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

You can't be serious.

GERTRUDE

Yes, I am.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

No one has traveled to the Druze in decades.

GERTRUDE

So, it is time.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

No British soldier will accompany you. It would mean a provocation for the Druze people. I myself as a soldier...

GERTRUDE

...Major of the Royal Welch Fusiliers...

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

Miss Bell, we seem to know quite a lot about each other already.

GERTRUDE smiles. Their eyes meet.

GERTRUDE

Major, I have come to ask you exactly for what you are graciously volunteering already. Don't develop any funny ideas such as sending troops after me if I do not show up for a while.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

The Druze will take you for a spy.

GERTRUDE

It is strange that you should say that. In a way I am. But I am a spy for no one.

INT. RESIDENCE OF DOUGHTY-WYLIE - EVENING

DOUGHTY-WYLIE'S wife JUDITH gestures a livered servant to let her open the door herself. GERTRUDE, wearing her rider's costume, enters. For this social event she has wrapped a Persian silk shawl around her neck, otherwise her dress is the dress of a nomad, bleached by the sun.

JUDITH

I am the consul's wife.

DOUGHTY-WYLIE steps forward.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

Don't be so formal, dear. Miss Bell, this is Judith. Welcome.

Gertrude has brought a small saddlebag made of leather polished by years of rubbing against the flanks of dromedaries. She produces two ornamental silver daggers.

GERTRUDE

I brought you a present, one for each of you.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

This is very kind.

GERTRUDE

I found them in the souk.

JUDITH

What do I do with it?

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

They are just beautiful, they show the rank of a sheik, so don't use them in the kitchen for your onions.

JUDITH does not understand the barb right away, but GERTRUDE exchanges a look with WYLIE.

INT. DINING ROOM - EVENING

A fairly Spartan dining room, but there are books everywhere. Only a set of candles makes the occasion a little bit more festive. GERTRUDE and WYLIE in animated discussion which leaves JUDITH somewhat isolated. She appears to be stiff, uninspired.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

The Druze are fiercely independent, and more than anything: anti-Turkish. They are the only ones who have handed the Turks a humiliating defeat.

GERTRUDE

This makes them so interesting. Besides, their faith incorporates Christian, Gnostic and neo-Platonic tenets which overlay their Islamic symbols...

JUDITH

Oh, let's not talk of Plato. Would you like a helping of the couscous?

But WYLIE and her guest have warmed up in their discourse.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

We are not talking about Plato, we are talking about a great danger Miss Bell will face.

GERTRUDE

It will be worthwhile.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

Be careful. The Druze do not play the game as it should be played, they go out to slay and they spare no one. While they have a grain of powder in their flasks and strength to pull the trigger, they kill every man, woman and child they encounter.

JUDITH

How awful.

WYLIE, following an inspiration, gets up and leaves the room. He returns with two ornate duel pistols, inlaid with silver and mother of pearl.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

Miss Bell, I want you to have them.

GERTRUDE

Oh, this is too much.

JUDITH

Dear, have you not said several times that you will never give these pistols away?

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

Now they are given away.

EXT. SYRIAN DESERT - DAY

GERTRUDE'S caravan is moving Northeast. Apart from camels, there are a few pack-mules. Far away, in a hazy distance, the forbidding mountains of the Jebel Druze. FATTUH, riding next to GERTRUDE, is nervous.

FATTUH

My worry is Omar, the muleteer.

GERTRUDE

I have thought about him. I did not know until this morning that he was a Beni Sakhr.

OMAR, a young man who is driving the mules looks over. He knows they are talking about him.

FATTUH

Shall we leave him behind?

GERTRUDE

Well, there is no mercy between the Druze and the Beni Sakhr. If two of them meet, one of them remains behind dead. But Omar grew up in the city.

FATTUH

I could hammer into him that he is from Damascus, that his family lived in the city for generations. He is young, but he is smart.

GERTRUDE

We shall keep him then. But talk to him.

They ride on, steadily. The camels groan; their pace almost looks like slow motion, but they make progress, inexorably.

EXT. SYRIAN DESERT - NIGHTFALL

FATTUH has set up camp. His men, five in all, are sitting around a tiny campfire, smoking, sipping coffee. GERTRUDE takes notes at a small table. Her chair, like the table, are foldable. She looks up.

FATTUH approaches, the muleteer OMAR in tow. Once close by, we notice that he cannot be older than sixteen.

GERTRUDE

Yes?

FATTUH

I realized that the Druze would recognize Omar as a Beni Sakhr by his accent.

GERTRUDE

I did not think about that. What do we do?

FATTUH

Ask Omar.

GERTRUDE

Omar, should I send you back before it is too late?

Something surprising is happening. OMAR, realizing that he is being addressed, shrugs his shoulders and points at his ears. He utters a few guttural sounds.

FATTUH

Omar suddenly became a deaf-mute.

GERTRUDE

When?

FATTUH

An hour ago.

GERTRUDE smiles, and FATTUH smiles back in a shrewd way. OMAR adds a few very convincing sounds of a deaf-mute.

EXT. DRUZE MOUNTAINS - DAY

The landscape, barren. Steep rocks, heat, a few thistles and a few goats nibbling on them. An eagle soars in the sky. GERTRUDE'S caravan moves onward, into the mountains of the Jebel Druze.

At a gulch to the side of the camel path, a well comes in sight. A group of women is fetching water, and the moment the strangers come into sight, they flee.

EXT. DRUZE MOUNTAINS, RAVINES - DAY

GERTRUDE, at the head of her small expedition, has slowed the pace of the animals. Warily, she checks the landscape.

Further on. The caravan is ambling along. The camels and the mules are tightly kept together.

Suddenly shrieks, shouts. From canyons at three sides riders charge at her. About twenty Druze warriors rush from an ambush at her. They fire shots in the air, galloping wildly in circles. The leader of this wild group hits GERTRUDE'S camel with a stick at the neck and forces the animal to kneel.

LEADER

You are my prisoners! You will all
die!

GERTRUDE dismounts and boldly steps right at the furious man.

GERTRUDE

If I die, I shall die from the hand
of your sheik. Take me to him.

The Druze warrior is visibly impressed by her fearlessness
and dismounts as well.

EXT. DRUZE MOUNTAINS, CAMP - DAY

A far stretched campsite of roughly a hundred black tents
strewn about. Camels, donkeys, goats, but not a soul in
sight. Everyone is hiding. The warriors are leading GERTRUDE
and her men to the biggest tent, and force FATTUH and his men
to squat in a circle. Without being invited, GERTRUDE
approaches the open flap of the men's side of the tent.

LEADER

(furious)

A woman passes through the entrance
at the women's side.

GERTRUDE

This woman is joining the men.

From the inside of the tent a hoarse voice.

SHEIK'S VOICE

Yallah! Step forward.

GERTRUDE enters without hesitation.

INT. SHEIK'S TENT - DAY

The SHEIK, leaning at a cushion, is surrounded by four
dignitaries. He must be in his eighties. His features are
gaunt, intelligent. An aura of authority surrounds him.

SHEIK

Sit, stranger. Sit, woman.

GERTRUDE squats down and sits cross-legged.

SHEIK (CONT'D)

Who are you to dare to come here?

GERTRUDE

I am Gertrude Bell, a subject of
the British Empire.

SHEIK

Thank the Almighty that you are not
a German.

GERTRUDE

For that, blessed be His Name, I
thank him every day.

SHEIK

Are you a spy?

GERTRUDE

No, I am not. I write about the
beauty of the land and its people.
In fact, I do not describe what I
see, I just name its beauty.

SHEIK

So, you are a poet?

GERTRUDE

In a way, maybe. But more in the
sense of the Roman poet Virgil...

SHEIK

(interrupting)

His Aeneid?

Now, GERTRUDE is astonished.

GERTRUDE

How does the sheik of the Druze
know about Virgil?

SHEIK

I have traveled. Incognito. I have
been to Damascus, to Beirut, to
Paris. You are right, this poet
never describes anything, he just
names the glory of the trees, the
beehives, the life in the country.
He is like our poets.

GERTRUDE

May I call in my servant?

The SHEIK nods.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)

Fattuh, bring my saddle bag.

FATTUH enters shyly, hands the bag, and withdraws immediately.

CU. GERTRUDE produces the two splendid duel pistols from the bag and hands them to the SHEIK. Barely acknowledging the gift, he tries to conceal his pleasure.

SHEIK

Stay with us as my guest. You are under the protection of our sacred hospitality.

EXT. OUTSIDE SHEIK'S TENT - LATER

The climate has changed completely. Men are sitting with FATTUH'S camel drivers and muleteers, chatting. Only OMAR tries to chime in with signs and gestures, but no one understands him. Everyone is smoking. Curious children have formed a circle around the group.

Women emerge from the women's compartment of the sheik's tent and place food in front of the strangers, and immediately disappear without a word. Music sets in.

INT. SHEIK'S TENT - EVENING

A few oil lamps illuminate the tent. Carpets have been spread out, and more pillows placed on the ground. About twenty men, all dignitaries, have assembled. GERTRUDE is in their middle. She is in animated conversation with the SHEIK, and sometimes one of the men of the round takes the word, but we do not hear what they say. The music continues. A platter with rice and a whole roasted sheep is set down in front of GERTRUDE.

EXT. DRUZE MOUNTAINS, WATER HOLE - DAY

A huge amount of Druze warriors has watered their camels. All of the men are armed with rifles, and many wear swords as well. There must be a small army of several hundred. Near the waterhole, GERTRUDE has pitched her tent. Her men are crouching around a fire. The leader of the warriors has his camel on the ground nearby.

GERTRUDE

Can this war be stopped?

WARRIOR

No. The Beni Sakhr have taken two thousand of our sheep in a nightly raid. We are a race of warriors.

GERTRUDE

But your sheik is not with you.

WARRIOR

He is ill. He is old. He is tired.

GERTRUDE

Since I left every man I meet tells me about him.

WARRIOR

And he asks every man about you.

GERTRUDE

What does he ask about me?

WARRIOR

He says: have you seen a queen traveling?

Without a greeting he straddles his seated dromedary, makes it get on its feet, and rides quickly after his army which is already on the move.

EXT. Umayyad Mosque, Courtyard - Day

The spectacular, vast courtyard of one of the marvels of the Islamic world. The glorious, immense mosque with its early Byzantine mosaics to the left, and Roman columns with a broken arch towards the souk in the background. The courtyard is paved with the finest of white marble. Men in groups discussing, faithful hurrying to the mosque, women and children strolling about. It is instantly clear that this was once the Center of the World.

GERTRUDE and DOUGHTY-WYLIE are strolling together, oblivious of the crowd and the magnificent surrounding.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

Great to see you back. Alive...

GERTRUDE

Please forgive me that I gave your pistols away.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

They were not mine, they were yours.

GERTRUDE

But...

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

They were only ornamental, and finally, finally they became useful, assumed a purpose.

GERTRUDE

I am sorry.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

Will you please keep quiet. Miss Bell, finally something has happened.

They move on, lose themselves in the vast crowd.

EXT. TEA HOUSE, SOUK - DAY

The largest, busiest market of the Arab world. Shops left and right, water vendors between the throng people, children playing, merchants haggling over prices with their clients. Veiled women, men with keffiyehs A few tables and chairs to the side of the flow of people. GERTRUDE and WYLIE are seated, sipping tea.

GERTRUDE

I want to go to Hayil.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

But that is in the middle of the Arabian desert, a forbidden zone.

GERTRUDE

We have reports from only a few travelers of the eighteen-fifties.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

Why, for God's sake, Hayil?

GERTRUDE

I want to meet the Emir Ibn Rashid. He is the mysterious leader of Arabia.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

Who will be with you?

GERTRUDE

Fattuh and my men. I trust them.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

But you will be alone.

GERTRUDE

I want to cut all links with the world, and that is the best thing for me to do.

EXT. STABLES OF THE BRITISH CONSULATE - DAY

A row of stables for horses. Some of them look out to the yard, nervous, stomping. An unknown horse has arrived, a beautiful Arabian black stallion.

Two stable boys hold the excited horse by its reins and try to hold it still as WYLIE is doing something strange. He is painting a white elongated mark onto the forehead of the beautiful animal. The stallion is moving abruptly, and WYLIE splashes some of the oil paint onto his neck.

GERTRUDE approaches. She immediately knows she has walked into something special.

WYLIE

You have arrived too early.

GERTRUDE

Should I turn back?

WYLIE

No. No, no, no.

GERTRUDE

What is going on?

WYLIE

This stallion is for you.

GERTRUDE

For me?

WYLIE

You will need the best horse in Arabia.

GERTRUDE

Why are you painting it? I have never seen such a thing.

WYLIE

Well...

GERTRUDE

(something dawning on her)
Well what?

WYLIE

I have to make a confession.

GERTRUDE lets this linger. WYLIE has to give an explanation. He waves the stable boys away and grabs the bridle himself.

WYLIE (CONT'D)

I stole this stallion for you.

GERTRUDE is baffled.

GERTRUDE

You stole this stallion for me?

WYLIE

In fact, I would not call it theft, it was more an act of expropriation

No doubt, this touches the adventurous heart of GERTRUDE. She cannot hide her excitement.

GERTRUDE

Where? From whom?

WYLIE

From the Turkish authorities. From the enemy, so to speak. This stallion was kept for visits of the Minister for Affairs of Syria...

GERTRUDE

But how for God's sake did you steal it?

WYLIE steps a step closer to GERTRUDE, whispering. His voice is not so low as not to betray his story to anyone possibly listening; he assumes the voice of a deep conspiracy between him and her.

WYLIE

There were two things I did: I paid off an editor of the newspaper to write about a dangerous disease spreading among horses. And then...

GERTRUDE

(whispering)

And then?

WYLIE

And then I took fake credentials as a veterinary...

GERTRUDE

Heavens!

WYLIE

...went straight to the Turkish garrison, and inspected the horses. This stallion here I was obliged to take away, and put it straight into quarantine. This was my duty to country and you.

GERTRUDE

And the white mark?

WYLIE

Gertrude, don't you see that no one will recognize the stallion.

GERTRUDE whispers almost inaudibly.

GERTRUDE

His Excellency, the British Consul Doughty-Wylie has...

All of a sudden he resembles a mischievous boy.

WYLIE

...has stolen a horse for you.

They look at each other with a deep look.

INT. BRITISH CONSULATE, DAMASCUS - EVENING

WYLIE unlocks the door from outside and enters the reception room. The desks are empty, the secretaries gone. He sits down at the edge of a desk and looks at GERTRUDE. A long moment of lingering expectancy. Neither of the two speaks. A clock ticks on the wall.

With a sudden resolve, WYLIE approaches GERTRUDE, takes her in his arms, and kisses her. They look at each other. GERTRUDE moves her lips close to his, very slowly, and kisses him back with a fleeting, shy kiss.

EXT. DAMASCUS, SOUK - MORNING

A busy morning at a market straight out of 1001 Nights. Beggars, Bedouins, Arabs, Turks, Armenians; the din of voices. Over all voices the wail of the muezzin from the nearby mosque.

GERTRUDE and FATTUH are busy to outfit her expedition. A fortune teller grabs GERTRUDE'S hand, trying to read her palm, but she gently shakes him off.

FORTUNE TELLER

The destiny, the fortune of the
Lady...

GERTRUDE

I forge my own fortune.

She turns to FATTUH who checks a big list.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)

What else?

FATTUH

Quinine, iodine, an antidote
against scorpions...

GERTRUDE

No, we shall be watchful. No
Bedouin ever gets stung.

FATTUH

Silverware, tablecloths, Wedgewood
china.

GERTRUDE

We won't find it here.

FATTUH

This market has everything.
Mosquito nets, a folding bed, a
canvas bathtub, camel saddles...

She stops him from continuing with his check list.

GERTRUDE

(pointing)

A store for camel gear.

INT. SOUK, STORE - MORNING

The shop-owner, a Druze, has spread out a variety of saddles on the floor. Assistants are busy to fetch different sizes and styles.

GERTRUDE

How about these?

FATTUH

The Lady has a good eye. They are the best.

Turning to the shop-owner.

FATTUH (CONT'D)

Let's talk about money. We would need twenty, that should bring the price down.

SHOP OWNER

They have no price.

GERTRUDE

What do you mean?

SHOP OWNER

I am a Druze. For the great friend of our beloved sheik there is never anything to pay.

EXT. CARAVANSARY OUTSIDE DAMASCUS - DAY

One of the age-old caravan posts where camels rest, and where caravans set out for their voyages. Dromedaries resting in the shadow of a mud wall which encircles the compound, a few flat buildings made of adobe, a well. The gate is open and a prehistoric looking truck is sputtering into the yard. It is loaded with goods.

FATTUH is organizing crates, bags and trunks which are spread out on the sandy ground. He seems to be ill. Six men work for him. They follow his instructions to arrange camel loads, tying the bundles together.

In the shadow of a far corner, GERTRUDE and WYLIE sit on simple bench, oblivious of all the activities in the background.

GERTRUDE

Now, it is me who has to make a confession?

WYLIE

A confession?

GERTRUDE

As wonderful as the horse was, it would not make it in the desert at the time of the rains.

WYLIE

Yes? And what did you do?

GERTRUDE

Fattuh traded it at the market for
four of the best dromedaries.

WYLIE laughs heartily. He understands Gertrude's point. He
falls silent. A long beat.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

Gertrude, don't leave, not now.

GERTRUDE

I have no choice, Richard. For ten
years there has been war and tribal
strife between the big factions,
and now, all of a sudden,
everything is peaceful, quiet.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

Stay a few more weeks.

GERTRUDE

It is late December already. The
desert will not be passable in a
month.

They fall silent. WYLIE takes her hand in his.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

I am longing for you.

GERTRUDE

My heart is heavy. Do not say
anything more.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

I will be very lonely without you.

GERTRUDE

You have a wife.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

It is a most unbearable loneliness
to be married unhappily.

GERTRUDE

Richard, I can never fully be yours
so long as you are a married man.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE

I will settle everything.

A pause. They look into each other's eyes.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE (CONT'D)
Will you write to me?

GERTRUDE smiles.

GERTRUDE
Yes, from every post office in the
desert.

He laughs. It makes it easier for them to leave each other.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)
I shall keep a diary for you.

INT. CARAVANSARY, MUD BUILDING - NIGHT

GERTRUDE stands next to a simple bed where FATTUH lies in fever. His head is covered in cold sweat, his breath short. A PHYSICIAN has checked the patient and rises.

PHYSICIAN
It's typhoid fever. We've had a lot
of cases recently, the symptoms are
obvious.

FATTUH
I shall travel tomorrow.

GERTRUDE
No, you will not.

FATTUH resigns himself into the inevitable without any further quarrel.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)
We have to set out tomorrow. The
cold weather is approaching
quickly.

FATTUH
I could follow you by train, in ten
days, inshallah. If you cross the
railroad tracks at the station of
Ziza, I could find you.

GERTRUDE
Doctor, is this realistic?

PHYSICIAN
Not quite. But if I put him under
heavy medication, maybe.

FATTUH

Young Abdullah can guide the camels. He knows how to read the desert.

EXT. CARAVANSARY OUTSIDE DAMASCUS - DAY

GERTRUDE'S caravan is leaving the encircled compound. There are twenty heavily packed camels and six men: three camel drivers, a cook, a Druze warrior, and ABDULLAH who rides at the head of the expedition together with GERTRUDE. No good-byes, no one is waving, only a few common curs bark at the animals.

Gusty wind from the West. It is cold. GERTRUDE has wrapped herself into a woolen Bedouin coat.

ABDULLAH

The wind is shouting.

GERTRUDE

Shouting of what?

ABDULLAH

The wind is shouting of rain.

EXT. HIGH DESERT - DAY

The caravan moves East, into an enormous vastness. High ground, stony, hard to negotiate for the patient animals. Wind and rain from behind. It is very cold. Some areas of the ground have turned into slippery muck.

The camels move with great caution. Music.

EXT. HIGH DESERT - EVENING

In the middle of nowhere, the expedition has stopped. All camels have their backs turned towards the rain; they huddle closely together and groan.

The campsite looks chaotic. Half opened loads, equipment strewn about. Three men try to erect GERTRUDE'S tent, but no one can find the central pole. The only neat looking place is an open crate with Wedgewood porcelain placed in rows onto the muddy ground.

GERTRUDE is exasperated, but outwardly maintains her calm.

GERTRUDE

I do not need the porcelain for my coffee. It will serve as a present, somewhere.

ABDULLAH inspects several lists, but he, like all others, is at a loss.

ABDULLAH

Fattuh's list says cups, and these are the only ones.

GERTRUDE

I have seen him packing my mug.

ABDULLAH

And the tent-poles?

GERTRUDE

They must be somewhere with the bed or the canvas tub.

It is obvious: this will be a bad evening, and a worse night.

EXT. CAMPSITE - MORNING

A totally unexpected sight: GERTRUDE'S tent and much of the ground is covered by a thin layer of snow. What was mud the previous night is frozen solid in the morning. Small puddles of rain are frozen over with fine ice.

The men have managed to start a fire of dry camel dung. Coffee is brewing. The ice crunches under the footsteps. GERTRUDE sits on a camp chair, wrapped into blankets. No one speaks. She warms her hands on her mug which must have materialized last night, and sips black, very concentrated coffee.

EXT. DESERT - DAY

A sequence of shots of the caravan crossing the desert. The feet of the camels crunching thin ice.

Wind, rain, sun, dust. Music.

The caravan moves across stony terrain.

Rest at a waterhole. Still chaos with the equipment. Camels biting each other, and always viciously trying to bite their riders as well.

GERTRUDE taking photos.

GERTRUDE mapping the desert with her theodolite. She makes entries into a large chart. Gusts of wind make her work difficult.

EXT. DESERT CAMP - EVENING

GERTRUDE at her table. The camp is quiet and settled. Most of the dromedaries are sleeping. The men are chatting around a small fire.

Sipping bitter, black coffee of the Arabs, she writes in her diary. The kerosene lamp on her table is flickering. The cook approaches with an egg held in his open hand.

COOK

Can the Lady show me how to do it?

GERTRUDE

Cook an egg?

COOK

The desert knows no eggs.

GERTRUDE walks over to the fireplace and puts the egg into a small pot with water.

GERTRUDE

You let it boil for five minutes.

COOK

The desert knows no minutes.

GERTRUDE

Boil it for the length of a prayer.

COOK

Oh Ever-Present!

GERTRUDE writes in her diary for Richard.

GERTRUDE'S VOICE

Richard, you are on my mind every step in the desert.

She looks up. Her gaze wanders over the campsite.

GERTRUDE'S VOICE (CONT'D)

My cook does not have a notion of time; he has never boiled an egg. Already I have dropped back into the desert as if it were my own place.

(MORE)

GERTRUDE'S VOICE (CONT'D)

Silence and solitude fall round you like an impenetrable veil; there is no reality but the long hours of riding, shivering in the morning and drowsy in the afternoon, the bustle of getting into camp; profounder sleep than civilization contrives, and then the roadless desert again.

EXT. ZIZA RAILWAY STATION - DAY

A railway station of the Hejaz line to the Holy Sites of Islam in the middle of nowhere. A few shabby columns and a tin roof. The rails of the train lose themselves in the infinity of distance. A few mud buildings nearby, dusty bushes and a small cluster of dusty palm trees.

GERTRUDE'S caravan is camping next to the rails. Desolation. Waiting. Time does not seem to exist.

From the distance, small like a dot, the train is finally approaching. Belching black smoke, the locomotive pulls into the station. The train is crowded with pilgrims on their way to Mecca, wearing only white sheets of linen wrapped around their bodies.

A single passenger descends: FATTUH. He looks thin and grey in the face, but he steps down from the wagon full of confidence. GERTRUDE is overjoyed to see him back.

GERTRUDE

Hamdilallah. Thanks God, you are back.

FATTUH immediately takes charge of affairs again.

FATTUH

Let's move the men and the camels away from the railway. We are far too exposed to the Turkish military.

GERTRUDE

They don't know where we are.

FATTUH

They tried to arrest me in the hospital in Damascus. Only the British Consul prevented it from happening.

GERTRUDE
Consul Doughty-Wyllie?

FATTUH
(smiling)
Yes.

He hands a stack of letters and a newspaper in Arabic to her.

FATTUH (CONT'D)
Letters from the Consul, and
letters from England.

GERTRUDE struggles to keep her emotions under control. She takes the stack of mail, but walks away into the shadow of the Ziza station a little bit too abruptly.

Opening the first letter she looks over to FATTUH who does not know what to do.

GERTRUDE
We shall stay here for the night. I
could send letters back from the
station in the morning.

FATTUH is not happy about her decision, but says nothing.

INT. ZIZA RAILWAY STATION - MORNING

GERTRUDE inside the dusty, empty hall of the station. A shriveled, old station master takes mail from her, but seems to be reluctant.

STATION MASTER
The baksheesh is not enough. This
here is the desert, this is no post-
office.

GERTRUDE
Will this do?

She hands him a large money bill and adds a beautiful keffiyeh. The man smiles. He did not expect that much.

FATTUH approaches with a pair of binoculars in his hand.

FATTUH
Will the Lady please step outside
and have a look.

EXT. ZIZA RAILWAY STATION - MORNING

GERTRUDE steps out and looks into the direction FATTUH is pointing out. She scans the distant horizon.

Seen through binoculars. In a cloud of dust, about ten horsemen are galloping along the rails towards the station.

GERTRUDE
Horses, uniforms...

FATTUH
Turkish cavalry. This is not good.

As soon as the soldiers arrive at her camp next to the rails, they start ransacking the baggage and her tent. A furious officer rides up to GERTRUDE, shouting.

TURKISH OFFICER
You are under arrest, all of you.

GERTRUDE notices that the officer is drunk, and starts a bold gamble.

GERTRUDE
A drunk officer does not give me commands.

TURKISH OFFICER
Who cares about a drink.

GERTRUDE
The Prophet, blessed be His Name...

This calms the angry officer somewhat.

TURKISH OFFICER
You are in defiance of Turkish rule.

GERTRUDE
I travel under diplomatic immunity.

TURKISH OFFICER
There is no immunity in the desert.

GERTRUDE
Officer, would you prefer to have the wrath of the army of the British Empire descending on you and your men?

TURKISH OFFICER
We defeat everyone.

GERTRUDE

You and your handful of men?

She makes an ominous pause.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)

This station has a telegraph. Do you want me to contact the Foreign Office in London, and your government as well?

TURKISH OFFICER

The telegraph is hereby put under my control.

GERTRUDE

Really?

The old STATION MASTER steps out into the sun, smiling at GERTRUDE. Now, the furious officer is not so sure any more.

TURKISH OFFICER

Do you have electricity here at all?

STATION MASTER

We do.

TURKISH OFFICER

The electricity is hereby under Turkish control.

GERTRUDE produces a pack of fine cigarettes from Damascus.

GERTRUDE

Officer. Let's sit down and smoke a cigarette together.

The officer hesitates, and then dismounts. The image fades slowly.

EXT. CAMPSITE AT ZIZA STATION - EVENING

FATTUH collects stolen items from the saddlebags of the Turkish cavalry. The riders are angry about this, but seem to be under orders to let things happen.

GERTRUDE sits with the TURKISH OFFICER at her table where she presents him with an alarm clock. He takes it reluctantly, but seems to be happy about the turn affairs have taken.

TURKISH OFFICER

Would you be so kind as to sign me
a document disclaiming all
responsibility for your safety and
the safety of your men?

GERTRUDE

Gladly. You and your brave men will
not have to worry.

EXT. RUINS IN THE DESERT - DAY

The caravan is moving steadily in the desert. The direction
of the expedition is always the same, East. The riders are
drowsy, and GERTRUDE manages to ride and sleep in her saddle.

They are heading for some very dilapidated ruins in a
depression of the desolate terrain. Sand has swept over the
remains of a well, and of the ruins there is only an arch
sticking out of the ground and the outlines of stone walls.

ABDULLAH, riding ahead of the others, waves. He has
discovered something.

Coming closer. There is the body of a dead man on the ground,
in the garb of a Bedouin. He is clutching a rifle in his
right hand which has turned into parchment. FATTUH descends
from his animal and inspects the body.

FATTUH

He has been shot.

GERTRUDE

How long ago?

FATTUH

No one can tell. A month, maybe a
year.

GERTRUDE

We have to bury him.

EXT. RUINS IN THE DESERT - EVENING

With the help of FATTUH, GERTRUDE makes "prints" of
inscriptions at the arch. She attaches a large piece of paper
to the stone and rubs it with charcoal until the inscription
appears clearly as a negative.

GERTRUDE

This is late Roman.

In the background we notice her servants who are still shoveling sand on the grave of the lonely dead.

FATTUH quickly digs sand away from a half submerged stone. He does this with great alacrity. GERTRUDE moves over to him and takes a look.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)

This must be early Islamic, seventh century.

INT. GERTRUDE'S TENT - NIGHT

GERTRUDE'S tent is rather spacious. A foldable bed, linen, a mosquito net. Two open trunks with clothes, books neatly piled on sand of the floor, papers, toiletries. She is pensive, writing in her diary for Richard.

GERTRUDE'S VOICE

I keep thinking of you and my heart is heavy.

She pauses. For a moment determined to cross the sentence out, but then she leaves it.

GERTRUDE'S VOICE (CONT'D)

The living are abandoned here, and so are the dead. This desert shouts one word at you: desolation. Even God has abandoned this entire landscape.

She turns her flickering kerosene lamp up.

GERTRUDE'S VOICE (CONT'D)

I think no one can travel here and come back the same.

EXT. DESERT - DAY

The caravan on its move to the East. All twenty camels are walking in a single file. No one speaks, only young ABDULLAH in front sings. Reaching the crest of a dune, he suddenly falls silent.

ABDULLAH

Camels, men!

GERTRUDE reaches him, and sees a flock of camels in the distance. A rider gallops furiously on his horse towards them, shrieking and firing shots, and suddenly there are riders from all sides encircling them.

One of the ragged men jumps from his horse and makes feigned attacks on GERTRUDE with his drawn sword. Slashing the air with his weapon, he utters shrill shouts. The men wear ragged clothes, they do not seem to be fully dressed.

And then a strange sight. A rider, a latecomer, charges down from a dune, stark naked on his horse.

The crazy men strip GERTRUDE'S servants of their weapons, force the camels to kneel down, and rip the saddle bags from her animals.

In the middle of this mayhem, one of the attackers recognizes her Druze camel driver. They exchange a few words in their language. The situation immediately calms down. The leader of the attackers approaches GERTRUDE.

HORSEMAN

Our sheiks would like to invite you
to drink coffee with them in their
tent.

At this moment, two elderly sheiks appear, one of them mounted on a beautiful horse with silver studded bridles. He gives a few calm commands to his men who instantly obey.

SHEIK

Will the Lady of the Desert be my
guest?

The image fades.

EXT. DESERT, VARIOUS LOCATIONS - DAY

The desert, shimmering in vague, contorted refractions of heated air. Everything is unreal, warped. The caravan is part of a mysterious daydream. Music sets in.

GERTRUDE maps the empty landscape which offers hardly any features for triangulation.

She takes photos of a group of women at a well. The women, being with a woman, remove their veils and freeze in a pose.

A camel in the middle of her moving caravan kneels down and refuses to get up again.

A solitary campsite in the last moments of the day.

EXT. CAMP IN THE DUNES - EVENING

GERTRUDE drinks camel milk from a cup and eats dates. She is forlorn in thoughts. All quiet, serene. The men in the background are tired and prepare for the night.

She opens her diary and starts to write.

GERTRUDE'S VOICE

I doubt whether there is anyone in the world so happy...You are baptized of the desert and there is no other salvation for you. Richard, I begin the days and I end the days with you...

EXT. DUNES - DAY

The caravan has stopped. An air of unease hovers over the men. FATTUH is concerned about dwindling water supplies. He talks to GERTRUDE.

FATTUH

The Lady will not be able to wash tonight. We are very low on water.

GERTRUDE

How far is the next well?

FATTUH

Two days. That's what Abdullah says, but we cannot be sure whether the well is dry or wet.

ABDULLAH comes down from a dune.

ABDULLAH

I have spotted tracks. Camels and men. We have to be careful.

GERTRUDE and ABDULLAH move up the highest dune with great caution. They duck on its crest and look through their binoculars.

GERTRUDE'S POV. There is a large camp in the distance, lots of black tents, camels. Smoke is curling into the motionless air.

ABDULLAH (CONT'D)

(whispering)

Howeitat. They are very dangerous.

GERTRUDE

How dangerous?

ABDULLAH

They make raids, big raids,
sometimes with more than three
thousand men.

GERTRUDE

What chance do we stand?

ABDULLAH

None. None whatsoever.

GERTRUDE

Should we flee?

ABDULLAH

They have probably spotted us
already. Do you see any men?

GERTRUDE

No.

ABDULLAH

That is the problem.

Back at the camels who are still standing, fully loaded. A
war council is being held.

FATTUH

When there are no men, they must be
out for an ambush.

ABDULLAH

What do we do?

GERTRUDE

We are the ones who have to take
the initiative. If we stay here any
longer, we'll be doomed.

FATTUH

Will the Lady rush them and ask for
their protection, before they kill
us off?

GERTRUDE

The Lady will. The wildest men are
subject to the sacred laws of
hospitality.

She jumps on her camel, whips it with her switch and rides
off at full speed.

EXT. HOWEITAT CAMP - DAY

GERTRUDE, all alone, forces her animal to a run. Although still far away, children and women flee into their tents. The camel comes to a stop and kneels outside the largest tent. The moment GERTRUDE dismounts, armed men appear from out of nowhere, hundreds of them. They come from all directions over the dunes, they emerge from the tents, from the depression of the waterhole.

For a long moment, things are in a delicate balance. Then a Howeitat dignitary emerges from the large tent.

DIGNITARY

Sheik Harb invites the Lady of the
Desert into his tent.

INT. SHEIK'S TENT - EVENING

SHEIK HARB is a fairly young man with fine features, sleek hands, but he is a man of no gestures. His eyes are penetrating, his body controlled. GERTRUDE sits cross-legged on a fine carpet in front of the SHEIK who is flanked by two dignitaries.

SHEIK HARB

According to Bedouin tradition I
would like to invite you to a meal.
We would be honored.

GERTRUDE

And it is my Anglez tradition to
welcome you to my poor campsite as
well.

SHEIK HARB

No one in the desert is poor. Every
Bedouin is noble, and every guest
is royalty.

Women bring in huge brass platters with rice, nuts, and a roasted sheep. SHEIK HARB reaches out for the head of the sheep which thrones on the roast, removes an eye, and offers it to GERTRUDE. She accepts the most coveted delicacy and eats it without the slightest hesitation. She swipes up yoghurt from the platter with a folded piece of soft, flat bread.

SHEIK HARB (CONT'D)

The Lady is bold. As bold as any
Bedouin man. Is your destination
Hayil?

GERTRUDE

I want to meet Ibn Rashid.

SHEIK HARB

We have to talk a lot about Ibn Rashid. He has powerful enemies.

GERTRUDE

Ibn Saud?

SHEIK HARB

Yes, and many others. You will not find him in Hayil.

GERTRUDE

Where is he?

SHEIK HARB

He is at war in the South.

GERTRUDE

But I heard there was peace between him and the Anazeh.

SHEIK HARB

Not any longer. Beware of Hayil. There is a lot of murdering going on.

The small group of Howeitat in intense discourse with GERTRUDE. Music sets in. They will sit together and talk through much of the night.

EXT. CAMP IN THE DUNES - DAY

SHEIK HARB is paying a visit to GERTRUDE'S camp. He has a dozen retainers with him and exudes great dignity.

GERTRUDE

Sheik Harb, I thank you for your hospitality. You have entertained me with wonderful stories of the desert...

SHEIK HARB

Every Bedouin is a storyteller.

GERTRUDE

And you have given me deep insight into the affairs of the tribes, as well as the affairs in Hayil.

She steps right up to him and removes her prized Zeiss binoculars from her neck.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)

I do see clearly thanks to you. I do not need my binoculars any more. Please accept them as my gift, a traveller of the desert who has become very rich.

The Sheik accepts the gift without showing any emotion, but it is clear he is moved.

SHEIK HARB

My nephew Hamad will be your escort. There will be no harm to you on your way. And when you reach the land of the Dulaim he will find you a man to accompany you from there.

HAMAD steps forward, very young, appearing as intelligent as he seems to be trustworthy.

SHEIK HARB (CONT'D)

Once in Hayil, nobody gets out. Inshallah. We want to see you again. Alive.

GERTRUDE

Inshallah.

EXT. NEFUD DESERT - DAY

The most forbidding of all deserts, the Nefud. Sand, salt plains, so blinding in the sun that the travelers have to protect their eyes with their keffiyehs wrapped around them. Heat sits in layers upon heat. The dromedaries are walking steadily, but have slowed down. GERTRUDE'S caravan is now moving more towards the South, directly into the sun.

There is no shelter, no shadow, no water, no sound.

EXT. NEFUD DESERT, CAMP - EVENING

The caravan rests. Water is clearly rationed. The lips of the men are dry, their skin breaking. The camels are tired.

HAMAD sits with GERTRUDE and FATTUH. They seem to be concerned.

HAMAD

From now on, we have to travel at night and rest during the day.

FATTUH

I see that.

GERTRUDE

I can see it too, but I can no longer chart the land. Not at night.

EXT. NEFUD DESERT - NIGHT

The caravan moves under a night sky so clear that it looks impossible, like an invention out of strange dreams. GERTRUDE has her notebook out on her knee; she writes while she is riding.

GERTRUDE'S VOICE

The stars are so bright and so clear that one can reach out for them. They are above me, next to me, and under me as well. I will reach out and harvest a handful for you...

A big music sets in.

EXT. NEFUD DESERT - EARLY MORNING

The caravan in the distance. Two riders join them. A short stop, a brief conversation.

Closer. The newcomers are Dulaim who join as escorts. The caravan grows larger.

EXT. NEFUD DESERT, NEAR HAYIL - DAWN

The tired caravan reaches a slight elevation. The two Dulaim escorts and HAMAD bring the animals to a stop. GERTRUDE rides up to the front man and looks.

DULAIM

Hayil.

He points with his face. And there it is, the mysterious desert town of Hayil, in the middle of the vast sand. It is not more than a long stretched mud wall which encircles flat mud buildings.

A minaret is slightly taller than the wall, a conspicuous building with a tower, and a few palm trees are visible for the observer outside. A big, representative gate opens up to the desert.

DULAIM (CONT'D)

We shall ride very slowly, and we shall rest outside the gate.

GERTRUDE

Doing what?

DULAIM

We wait, and we see.

GERTRUDE

There is no one in sight.

DULAIM

They are fighting inside about what to do with us.

EXT. NEAR HAYIL GATE - LATE AFTERNOON

The caravan is parked outside the gate. Only a very provisional camp has been pitched. All eyes are glued to the empty gate of the silent town.

EXT. NEAR HAYIL GATE - NIGHT

Still there is no camp. Dark night, silence. GERTRUDE and her men are sleeping in the open. A few lights flicker. Only FATTUH is awake.

EXT. NEAR HAYIL GATE - EARLY MORNING

Something is stirring inside Hayil. A horse whinnies. Then the dull noise of horses moving in the sand. All eyes on the gate.

Three dark men on horseback come riding out of the gate, slowly, casually. They wear white robes and carry swords.

FATTUH

Slaves. I do not know what this means.

One of the slaves points with his sword to follow him into Hayil.

FATTUH (CONT'D)

Mount the camels. We will not enter
on foot.

EXT. STREETS OF HAYIL - MORNING

Hayil is a desert town with narrow alleys, mud buildings which barely have any windows. No streets, there is only sand between the houses. Whispers behind doors. GERTRUDE rides her camel, following the slaves. They reach a wider, sandy place in front of a tall building, the palace of the Emir.

Dozens of armed riders cut GERTRUDE off from her entourage. She turns around, witnessing FATTUH and her men being taken prisoner.

FATTUH

Stay calm. Everyone. Stay calm.

The swordsmen dismount in front of the large entrance to the main building and force GERTRUDE'S camel to kneel. She steps from her saddle.

INT. EMIR'S PALACE - MORNING

Led by the slaves, GERTRUDE enters the reception hall, a wide room with a very high ceiling which is supported by tall, sleek columns. No furniture, only carpets and large pillows for seating. Ornaments run along the white walls. GERTRUDE is left alone. IBRAHIM, the man apparently in charge, enters. He is a shrewd looking man in his forties. He speaks without greeting her.

IBRAHIM

I am Ibrahim, the uncle of our
beloved Emir.

GERTRUDE

Will I see him?

IBRAHIM

The Emir is away.

GERTRUDE

For how long?

IBRAHIM

He is on a raid against his
enemies. You have no permission to
leave until the Emir returns.

GERTRUDE

And my men?

As he has come, he leaves without greeting. GERTRUDE is left alone. The door has been locked behind IBRAHIM. She strolls around. About twelve feet up on one of the walls there is a tiny window and a ladder leading up to it. GERTRUDE looks around. She decides to climb up and take a look.

GERTRUDE'S POV. Flat roofs of mud houses. Mats are spread out indicating that the inhabitants sleep at night outside on their roofs. The noise of the door being unlocked draws her attention.

Two women enter, both dressed in wide, adorned robes. Gold chains and pearls around their necks; they are unveiled. They are very friendly, but it is apparent that they are sent to spy.

FATIMA

I am Fatima, the grandmother of the Emir, and this is Turkiyyeh who will entertain you.

FATIMA smiles a toothless smile.

TURKIYYEH

Welcome to Hayil. You must be the Lady of the Desert? Rumor has been faster than your camels.

GERTRUDE

I am Gertrude Bell.

FATIMA

Who has sent you?

GERTRUDE

I am on my own.

FATIMA

On your own?

GERTRUDE

It is strange, but this is the first thing I said as a child.

TURKIYYEH smiles. She invites GERTRUDE to take a seat. FATIMA leaves them alone.

TURKIYYEH

I know the world. I come from Istanbul;

(MORE)

TURKIYYEH (CONT'D)
the Sultan sent me as a gift to Ibn
Rashid. What are your plans?

GERTRUDE
I want to meet Ibn Rashid.

TURKIYYEH
He has been driven out of Hayil,
his women followed him, and all his
Shammar tribesmen, but he left me
behind.

GERTRUDE
He was the guest of the Emir here?

TURKIYYEH
Yes, the Emir who ruled six years
ago.

GERTRUDE
What happened?

TURKIYYEH
(whispering)
This palace is full of
conspiracies, full of murder.

GERTRUDE
What happened to the Emir?

TURKIYYEH
He was assassinated, and his
successor was murdered, and his
successor as well, all within a few
years. Their eunuchs were killed
with them, and the entire harem was
passed on from man to man to man.

GERTRUDE
Who is the Emir ruling now?

TURKIYYEH
There was hardly anyone left in his
family, so he is young. He is
raiding in the North. Fatima, his
grandmother, is the true ruler. She
is the real Emir.

The door opens and two slaves enter. One of them swings a
censer and fumigates GERTRUDE, the other serves black coffee
and dates. The image fades.

INT. HAYIL, PALACE - EVENING

GERTRUDE, all alone, paces up and down. Her bed has been brought in, her chair, and some of her baggage. She sits down and begins to write in her diary for Richard.

GERTRUDE'S VOICE

I am kept in this place where the walls whisper of murderous plots. Dark secrets are the rulers, not men. I have been held for a week now, and no one knows when the Emir will return.

A long fade.

INT. HAYIL, PALACE - DAY

Time has passed. GERTRUDE has made herself more comfortable in the large room. Her belongings are neatly spread out. She reads in a book.

Two slaves enter, followed by FATIMA.

GERTRUDE

(bluntly)

I have been here a prisoner for almost three weeks...

FATIMA

You are not a prisoner. Your men are taken care of well. You are only requested to stay until the Emir decides.

GERTRUDE

Decides what?

FATIMA

It would be good to have you here.

GERTRUDE

For what?

FATIMA

My wish is to keep you here in the harem of the Emir. He will be delighted.

EXT. TOWN OF HAYIL - DAY

Seen from the town through the main gate. A huge amount of warriors is returning to Hayil, at least a thousand in number. Prancing horses, dromedaries, shots being fired into the air, shouts. Dogs rush out to greet the army with furious barking.

INT. HAYIL, PALACE - DAY

Commotion outside the door. Shots ring out in the distance. Shrill ululating of women. GERTRUDE stands calmly in the middle of the tall columns. The door swings open; slaves enter with censers, warriors burst in, opening a gap for the Emir who is briskly stepping forward.

The Emir is wounded. The first thing we notice is his left arm in a sling and a bandage around his forehead. And then we realize that he is just a puerile adolescent, barely fifteen years old, with a trace of fuzz on his cheeks. He is followed by his toothless, excited grandmother FATIMA.

EMIR

I am delighted to greet my guest...

FATIMA

(quickly)

He means, I am delighted to greet my wife into my harem.

GERTRUDE

Emir, what an honor to meet you. However, I am already married. I am a member of the British Consuls's harem. This would cause problems for both the man and his country.

The Emir is stunned.

EMIR

I was told otherwise.

The image fades quickly.

EXT. DAMASCUS, COURT OF THE Umayyad Mosque - DAY

The Great Courtyard of the Mosque, already familiar for GERTRUDE and WYLIE. The usual magnificence, the usual crowd. They are standing in the middle of the world of business and religious fervor.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE
I have read your diary.

GERTRUDE
It was meant for you.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE
The world is changing.

GERTRUDE
While I was in the desert, the War
broke out; I didn't even notice.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE
Serbia and the Hapsburgs are in it,
and Russia has entered, and now it
is Germany, Turkey, England, all of
Europe. The world is at war. You
should be more systematic out
there. You should do some real
spying. All of a sudden your
knowledge has become very valuable
for the Empire.

He makes a pause.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE (CONT'D)
I have reactivated my military
career.

GERTRUDE
I expected it.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE
This will not be long. We shall be
together when all is over.

The world around them does not exist for them.

INT. DOUGHTIE-WYLIE'S OFFICE - EVENING

The two lovers are alone in the empty office. WYLIE holds
GERTRUDE in his arms. They are silent for a long time.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE
This time I shall do everything
right. The moment I am back, I
shall put everything with Judith in
order. I shall be free.

GERTRUDE cries quietly.

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE (CONT'D)
I'd rather put a bullet in my head
than not live with you.

GERTRUDE
And I shall rather go to sleep
forever if we will not...

DOUGHTIE-WYLIE
Do not talk of morphine. I do not
want to hear it again.

GERTRUDE
I want to live. To live only for
you.

She calms. They hold each other in the darkened office. There
is an aura of confidence in both of them.

CAPTION: A YEAR LATER

The image fades up.

INT. CAIRO, ARAB BUREAU - DAY

Hotel Semiramis, The Arab Bureau occupies several floors of
the sumptuous turn-of-the-century hotel. Several suites are
connected through wide open doors. It looks more like a
newsroom of a big newspaper than a government agency. Dozens
of secretaries hammer along on noisy black typewriters,
employees huddle over reports, messengers hasten along
corridors.

GERTRUDE strolls through the suites with an old acquaintance
on her side, LAWRENCE. He is still dressed in gaudy style,
albeit his wild hair appears to be a little bit tamed.

LAWRENCE
Gertie, this is fantastic.
Congratulations! They made you
Oriental Secretary - the post was
invented for you. All this is your
staff.

GERTRUDE
And you have become a senior
adviser. You have morphed into a
political animal.

LAWRENCE
Technically, I am under you, but...

GERTRUDE

But?

LAWRENCE

There are no other men like me.

He roars his familiar laughter. GERTRUDE chimes in.

LAWRENCE (CONT'D)

There are no other women like you
either.

He slaps at her in a very gay manner.

LAWRENCE (CONT'D)

You Queen, you uncrowned Queen.
You!

INT. CAIRO, ARAB BUREAU BALLROOM - NIGHT

The pompous ballroom of the Hotel Semiramis. Candelabras, mirrors, velvet couches, servants in livery, champagne. About a hundred guests have gathered for some official occasion. Diplomats, British officers, Arabs, high ranking religious leaders and scholars from the Al Azahr university.

GERTRUDE is joined by a group of Islamic scholars. They discuss politics, but GERTRUDE does not really listen. She pays attention to a small circle of British officers in gala uniforms right next to her. They talk about the battle of Gallipoli. A general has news.

GENERAL

Our losses at Gallipoli are
staggering. And the Australian
expedition force must have lost
thirty thousand men in one single
day.

A CORONEL cautions him.

CORONEL

General, this is still classified.

GENERAL

I do not care. By tomorrow the
whole world will shout it from
their windows.

CORONEL

Doughty-Wylie who led the assault
was already awarded the Victoria
Cross.

GERTRUDE spins around. She joins the group of officers.

GERTRUDE
Richard Doughty-Wyllie?

CORONEL
Royal Welsh Fusiliers, yes.

GERTRUDE
But the Victoria Cross is only for
fallen heroes.

CORONEL
Correct, when Doughty-Wyllie stormed
the Turkish fortifications ahead of
his men, he was shot through the
head.

GERTRUDE turns abruptly, so abruptly that everyone next to her immediately notices the enormity of the moment for her. She stands still, slightly shivering, and then walks out briskly. As if the entire ballroom was witnessing a momentous event, everyone falls silent. A gap of silent guests opens for her to walk out briskly. Every single eye is on her. Her face has turned into stone.

EXT. RIVER NILE, CAIRO - DAY

The majestic Nile river seen from a large window. The day is bright, serene. Dhows, ancient looking riverboats with triangular sails move calmly, imperturbable in their voyages since millennia.

The camera moves back, inside the room. GERTRUDE sits at a desk, writing a letter.

GERTRUDE'S VOICE
Dearest father, in the afflictions
of my heart I am turning to you. It
is as if my life has ended, and
only the great task I have
shouldered keeps me going...

She looks up and watches the river. Music sets in.

INT. ARAB BUREAU, OFFICE OF PERCY COX - DAY

The office is spacious with windows to one side facing the Nile island of the city of Cairo, to the other overlooking the Nile. Sir Percy Cox, an intelligent man in his late fifties, appears to be agitated. He speaks way too loud with GERTRUDE, almost shouting.

COX

I am the Chief Political Officer,
not you! You are meddling in
affairs which belong to the
jurisdiction of the British Viceroy
in India.

GERTRUDE

(calmly, collected)

Sir Percy, with all due respect, it
is a monstrous contortion which
only administrations can create.
And bureaucracy always tends to
become a fossil.

COX

The administration of India only
shows how successful we can be.

GERTRUDE

But it would be a historical
mistake...

COX

Ah, here speaks the historian.

GERTRUDE

...to run the administration of
Mesopotamia through India.

COX

The British India Expeditionary
Force is already in place. Do I
send a cable and remove them? Just
like that?

GERTRUDE

We have to look at the long-ranging
policy. Mesopotamia is the Arab
heartland, we have to coordinate
all Arab issues from here, from
Cairo.

COX

You are speaking of people...

GERTRUDE

...and cultures...

COX

...but you have to learn how to
deal with real life, public life,
with administration for example.

EXT. BAGHDAD, GARDEN OF BRITISH EMBASSY - DAY

The big garden of the British Embassy. Rattan chairs, carpets on the lawn, couches, tables. About sixty guests, mostly men in pith helmets and light suits, diplomats, and a good amount of Arabs in their traditional dress.

GERTRUDE is alone next to a palm tree, clutching a glass of juice. LAWRENCE strolls across the lawn, stepping very close.

LAWRENCE

Prince Faisal would like to make
your acquaintance.

GERTRUDE

He seems to be everywhere. How does
the third son of the Sharif Hussein
deal with his brothers?

LAWRENCE

They are only interested in horse
races. His older brother Abdullah,
however, has to be reckoned with.
He is equally intelligent.

EXT. GARDEN OF BRITISH EMBASSY - TOWARDS EVENING

PRINCE FAISAL, a fairly young man, sits with GERTRUDE on one of the couches. His eyes are intense, his hands fine. Of slim build, he exudes a natural authority. They must have been in conversation most of the afternoon.

FAISAL

Miss Bell, please do not deny it...

GERTRUDE

Sheik, many others were active in
this strategic shift.

FAISAL

We owe it to you that the Viceroy
of India is not administering
Mesopotamia any longer. What is
your opinion?

GERTRUDE

This is a bottomless question.

FAISAL

Why?

GERTRUDE

The French have an eye on it,
Germany, and Turkey as well. And
how can Ibn Rashid and Ibn Saud be
reconciled?

FAISAL

Let me be straightforward.

GERTRUDE

Yes?

FAISAL

Ibn Rashid is on the way out.

GERTRUDE

The big question is how to define a
state of Mesopotamia.

FAISAL

We should call it Iraq, like all
Arabs do. What do you think of
seasonal borders?

GERTRUDE

It would be an ill-conceived idea
to let the Anazeh own the desert
during winter, and the Shammar move
in for the summer pastures. And
what about the Dulaim who are on
the move all the time?

The image fades quickly.

EXT. BAGHDAD, GERTRUDE'S HOUSE - DAY

A small garden, intimate, surrounded by hedges and brick
walls. Flowers everywhere. FATTUH steps out of the house and
discreetly moves a gardener out of sight of GERTRUDE who is
writing on a table in the shadow of a tree. She looks up.

GERTRUDE

What would I do without you,
Fattuh?

FATTUH

I shall follow the Lady to the ends
of the world.

GERTRUDE

Baghdad has become one of the
centers of the world again.

She returns to the letter she is writing.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)

Dearest father, Baghdad has become
one of the centers of the world
again, and I am deep in
intrigues...

EXT. OUTSIDE BASRAH, MILITARY COMPOUND - DAY

A vast military compound. Some very large white tents have been erected, tribunes with seats on scaffolds which overlook a wide stretch of desert. At first sight it appears to be a setup for a horse race, but it becomes quickly obvious that this is a display of military hardware.

Light artillery is lined up, machine guns, and mortars. A band of fife and bagpipes in Scottish skirts is marching past the stands.

In the stands the top brass of the British military, but there are ladies in fine dress with large hats among them. There is a cordoned off area for the highest dignitaries, and we make out GERTRUDE seated next to IBN SAUD watching the display below. IBN SAUD is a tall, impressive man with bold features.

At a signal of an officer the cannons go off in rapid succession, and machine guns are firing at targets about 200 yards off in the open desert. For a moment, the fire stops, and a double-decker airplane flies by at very low altitude.

In the stands, IBN SAUD turns to GERTRUDE.

IBN SAUD

(with an ironic smile)

Impressive.

GERTRUDE

It is meant to impress you, I admit. But what can impress an Ibn Saud, a man who has made a daring escape from prison, who has started a military campaign with only sixteen men, and who prides himself to be the husband of fifty-six wives.

IBN SAUD

And who owns the finest falcons on earth.

He laughs heartily.

IBN SAUD (CONT'D)
But Arabia will emerge from the
recesses of time.

A military surgeon in uniform approaches with four soldiers who carry a strange apparatus which is connected with long cables to a generator under the stands.

SURGEON
Sheik, your hand please.

IBN SAUD
What is this?

SURGEON
An x-ray machine. It has become our
most important tool in field
hospitals.

Ibn Saud places his hand on a flat surface. A screen lights up, and the x-ray machine begins to hum. IBN SAUD'S hand becomes visible. He sees his bones and the rings attached to them. He moves his hand to make sure.

IBN SAUD
This is an impressive invention.
British?

SURGEON
(with humor)
Unfortunately not. German. Our
enemies.

IBN SAUD
How good that the world is capable
to create things beyond wars and
enemies.

The image fades.

EXT. PYRAMIDS OF GIZEH - DAY

The Sphinx with the great pyramids of Gizeh towering behind the mysterious statue. A group of reporters and photographers has taken position. They are witnessing a strange display. Dromedaries are seated in a row with their camel drivers waiting next to them. Several large black limousines are pulling up in the sand and a small group of statesmen and generals are emerging. We recognise GERTRUDE, LAWRENCE, and SIR PERCY COX. A big, chubby man with a big hat and an even bigger cigar in his mouth emerges last.

The reporters begin shouting questions. One of them is louder than the others.

REPORTER

Winston Churchill, what do you expect from the Cairo Conference?

CHURCHILL

Boys, let's face it, a new order of the Arab World.

GERTRUDE nudges LAWRENCE.

GERTRUDE

Churchill tries to sell this as an achievement of the British Empire.

LAWRENCE

What else is it?

GERTRUDE

We are not leading them into self-determination. The Arab Nations are awakening. It is their achievement.

But LAWRENCE does not really listen. He badly wants some of the spotlight. Yearning to distract the attention away from CHURCHILL he quickly steps back to his limousine and produces two lion cubs which he holds under his arms on both sides of his hip.

REPORTER

Mister Lawrence! Mister Lawrence, please, over there with the pyramids in the background!

LAWRENCE, all media-savvy, follows gladly. Flashbulbs go off, for a moment he is the center of attention.

Meanwhile, CHURCHILL has tried to mount a dromedary, but the moment the animal rises up on its hind legs, back high up in the air, CHURCHILL slips from his saddle into the sand. He scrambles to his feet.

CHURCHILL

Dammit. Lawrence, you saved my day, or has anyone of the boys taken a picture of this disgraceful beast?

As if on cue, the beast tries to bite CHURCHILL in the back.

REPORTER

Mr. Churchill, please do it again!

But this time CHURCHILL is careful. With the help of several officers he stays in the saddle. He looks unhappy.

CHURCHILL

My cigar. My cigar went out.

LAWRENCE has handed the cute lion cubs to his chauffeur and mounts a camel. GERTRUDE, in a row of ten politicians and officers, is placed between CHURCHILL and LAWRENCE. She wears a dark coat with a fur rim and an awful hat in a style which has survived until the days of the current Queen of England.

The camel drivers align their animals in a precise row, and following the shouts of the reporters move out of the shot with the pyramids in the background.

REPORTER

Miss Bell, please closer to Sir Winston. And smile.

Without his lions, LAWRENCE is somewhat neglected. He tries to gain ground again.

LAWRENCE

(proclaiming)

Four thousand years are looking upon you.

CHURCHILL

Oh, Lawrence, shut up. Napoleon said that before you.

The frenzied clicks of cameras. Light bulbs flash. The image freezes as a sepia tinted photo for historical archives.

EXT. DESERT - LATE AFTERNOON

Somewhere out in the desert. Several large ornamental Bedouin tents have been erected. An ambience of royalty over the scene. Arabs, Bedouins, sheiks, dignitaries. A camel race is on. Young ambitious boys, whipping their beasts, race past the tents and disappear in a cloud of dust and sand. Shouts, applause.

Under a canopy GERTRUDE is seated on the chair of the honored guest at the right of FAISAL. Next to him his older brother ABDULLAH, a dignified looking man in his forties. FAISAL has a beautiful falcon on his shoulder, and ABDULLAH an almost identical one on his gloved hand. Their eyes are covered with a hood of leather.

FAISAL

My brother Abdullah and I have read your memorandum on the Arab world. Congratulations, you do express our feelings...

ABDULLAH

No one in the western world knows the heart of the Bedouin better than you.

FAISAL

The Bedouins call you Al Khatum, the Noble Lady.

GERTRUDE

I am honored.

ABDULLAH

And some call you The Mother of the Faithful, a title given to the wife of the Prophet, blessed be His Name.

GERTRUDE

In the face of two direct descendants of the Prophet, and in the face of the people of the desert, it is impossible for me to accept this highest of honors.

FAISAL offers GERTRUDE a tiny gold rimmed cup with bitter black coffee. It is like during her travels in the desert.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)

Thank you. I wish I could return your hospitality with pistols or binoculars, but all I offer these days is a memorandum here and there.

ABDULLAH

But yours describes us with deep insight.

FAISAL leans over to a servant who immediately hands a leather-bound paper to him. FAISAL reads.

FAISAL

"Islam is the bond that unites the central parts of the continent, as it is the electric current by which the transmission of sentiment is effected, and its potency is increased by the fact that there is little or no sense of territorial nationality to counterbalance it."

ABDULLAH

Well observed.

GERTRUDE

But history points in the direction of new nations.

FAISAL

Are you not contradicting yourself? You write, and I agree: "If you ask an Arab from which country he is, he would answer, I am a native from Amman, from Basrah, from Riyadh, from Homs, or Aleppo."

GERTRUDE

Maybe the strength of your world lies in this contradiction.

They fall silent. ABDULLAH waves to a servant and whispers in his ear.

Servants bring a cage with sleek wild doves. ABDULLAH removes the hood from his falcon, FAISAL follows suit.

ABDULLAH

These are the finest falcons in the world, lanner falcons.

FAISAL

They are slightly smaller than the peregrine, as you may notice.

GERTRUDE

How beautiful.

FAISAL

And fierce. The lanner falcon is the only bird of prey which hunts in pairs.

At a nod, the servant releases one of the doves. In an instant, both falcons are in the air.

One of them soars high up in the air whereas the other flies a complex pattern lower to the ground. The coordination is stunning. The dove evades the plunging attack of the higher flying falcon, but in a second is caught by the other.

GERTRUDE

These are the falcons worthy of kings.

FAISAL and ABDULLAH are very proud.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)

You will be kings soon.

ABDULLAH

Over whom?

GERTRUDE

Over the people I love.

FAISAL

What makes an English woman love us so much?

GERTRUDE

I have a trusted man from Homs who has saved my day many times in the desert. When his old mother speaks to him, and he has many brothers, she would always say, "Fattuh, my son, in whom I entrust to bury me", and then she asks him about the weather or the garden. For that alone my heart is with you.

Her heart becomes heavy. She falls silent. FAISAL and ABDULLAH fall silent as well. The whole crowd who has listened stops talking.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)

My camel.

A servant leads her camel by its bridle to the tent.

GERTRUDE (CONT'D)

With your permission?

FAISAL

Go in peace.

GERTRUDE mounts her camel quickly and rides away into the desert, towards the vast horizon.

ABDULLAH turns to his brother FAISAL.

ABDULLAH

How could she know that we may be
kings?

FAISAL

She is the maker of kings. She is
the Uncrowned Queen of the Desert.

GERTRUDE has become a blurred mirage at the horizon. A slow
fade into black. A written caption appears on the screen.

ABDULLAH, FAISAL, AND IBN SAUD BECAME KINGS OF IRAQ, JORDAN,
AND SAUDI ARABIA RESPECTIVELY.

GERTRUDE BELL DELINEATED THE BORDERS OF TODAY'S IRAQ.

SHE DIED FROM AN OVERDOSE OF SLEEPING PILLS IN 1926.