

## Synopsis

In 1938, Diane, a young British nurse, impulsively marries Ibrahim Haddad, an Iraqi doctor visiting London. Soon she's settling into the Haddads' ancient family home on the Tigris. When she's hired as the nanny to four-year-old Prince Faisal, she realises that the king is colluding with Nazi Germany. She sees nothing wrong in passing information along to Duncan Claybourne, a junior British Embassy officer. War is coming, and lives are at stake.

Then, on a warm April night in 1939, the king dies in a mysterious car accident. The British are blamed – including Diane. Worse, Ibrahim believes that Diane has had an affair with Duncan. A wedge is driven deep between them, but they carry on in dignified silence and eventually raise a family together.

Many years later, Duncan returns to Baghdad to find Diane and her family in crisis. The Baath Party now rule Iraq. Diane's youngest son, Ziad, is a dissident, and the secret police are closing in. Ziad and his sister Mona believe Duncan can get Ziad safely out of Iraq. They cannot understand their parents' reluctance to ask Duncan for help, so they take matters into their own hands -- with disastrous results.

## Extract [portions chapters 4/5]

They sailed to Iraq. It would have been quicker by train, but they wanted to stretch days as well as miles between their two countries.

Diane watched the south coast pull away. It was a long time before England disappeared, but then it vanished all at once, swallowed up by the rim of the sea, and that was that.

The Strathdern was a P&O ship filled with British Empire matrons returning to India for the winter. The matrons touched their curls when they realised that the lively young nurse was married to the sombre Iraqi doctor: how *unexpected*. They complained to Diane about their hill-station servants. She was to watch out for servants in Baghdad, they were never honest.

She curled up out of the wind, wrapped in a scratchy scarf that she'd stolen from her father at the last minute, but the matrons tracked her down. They brought her glasses of tonic water and admired her highbrow choice in books -- *A Farewell to Arms*, Maurois' biography of Shelley, a book on Nineveh by Austen Layard. None of them were really hers. Her father had given her the Hemingway, because he'd wanted to share something of his own with her before she left. Lucia had lent her the Maurois before they stopped speaking to each other, and Ibrahim

had noticed the Layard at a second hand book shop on Charing Cross Road and had bought it for his sister Laila, the intrepid archaeologist.

She was reading the Layard -- or rather she was idly leafing through it, telling herself she would find it more interesting when she was actually there -- when a man walked by, glanced down, and paused.

“I’m impressed.”

She’d seen him before, marching along the corridors. He was a large, rumpled young man in creased corduroy trousers and scuffed brogues. He always wore a Tam O’Shanter below deck, but out here he carried the hat, presumably because it was so windy.

“Layard’s a great authority,” he continued, and started talking about the importance of his excavations, and how brilliantly he’d managed to combine his work in archaeology with a distinguished career as a diplomat.

“My husband gave it to me,” said Diane, turning the book over in her hands as if it wasn’t a book at all, but something more practical. A spoon, perhaps, or a hammer. She noticed that it was stirring, in a complicated way, to say those words: *my husband*.

“Did he really? Is he an archaeologist?” The man’s accent carried the soft but unmistakable burr of well-born Edinburgh.

“A doctor.” And then, because he hadn’t asked, she couldn’t resist adding, “He’s Iraqi.”

“Ah yes. I’ve seen him.”

At this, he rocked on the balls of his feet and looked away. They were halfway through the Suez Canal. Along the concrete embankments people stopped whatever they were doing, shaded their eyes, and peered up at the Strathdern, whose upper decks loomed high above them.

That was how Ibrahim found her: chatting with an intemperate looking Scotsman, whom she started to introduce before realising she didn’t know his name.

“Duncan Claybourne,” he said.

The two men shook hands and talked for a few minutes as if Diane was no longer there. Ibrahim was the more courteous one, asking questions and deftly turning away any interrogation about himself. The Scotsman, it turned out, was a diplomat himself, on his way to his first posting as a junior Embassy officer.

“I wanted Cairo, but I got Baghdad,” he said, in a way that made it clear that Baghdad was the lesser choice.

“I hope you will come to love our country,” said Ibrahim, and Claybourne said he hoped so too before ambling off, whistling and beating his Tam O’Shanter lightly against one leg.

They didn't speak again, although Diane would shiver with self-consciousness whenever Duncan Claybourne stalked by with his absurd hat. He always looked as though he was on an important errand, paying no attention to his surroundings and nodding briefly if he passed her, but he couldn't possibly have been. The ship was a confinement for them all. Their lives were in abeyance, and it wasn't bringing out the best in anyone. Ibrahim was guarded, and she felt brittle, as if she was being judged for some invisible crime. Claybourne was untrustworthy, she decided – the type who joins the Foreign Service to escape failure at home, or a romantic disappointment.

When they finally drew close to Basra, Ibrahim and Diane stood at the ship's rail and watched Iraq unfold to their left. To their right lay Persia, invisible behind palm trees bent almost flat by the harsh wind from the south. Al-Basrah: It meant, *the view*, Ibrahim told her. It was the city of honeymoons, the Venice of the East, where young couples took boat rides along the Shatt al Arab and drank pomegranate juice in the canal-side cafes. They would have their own honeymoon night there, although of course they'd had a private berth on the ship.

Diane leaned out over the railing as they approached land, her hair whipping into her eyes. The port crept into view, revealing first a shanty-town of mud huts, then broad riverside boulevards and colonial mansions of white and pale pink stucco. A British warship was anchored in the middle of the Shatt Al Arab. A swarm of smaller vessels spun around it, catching at ropes and offering goods. Further away, dhows with varnished wooden prows turned like lost compasses, caught in the wash from the Strathdern as the steamer edged its bulging flank up to the corniche and the dockers tightened ropes around bollards. Above a nearby ship, a race-horse hung limp in a sling, buffeted by the wind. It beat its hooves in panic as it was lowered towards the deck. On the quayside, the waiting herd shifted and stirred behind metal barricades.

Watching, Diane was suddenly reluctant to disembark. What if she stayed on board and sailed off for India? Would Ibrahim follow her and make her return? Could she escape, even now? The Matrons would take her in. They'd understand. She was young: she'd made an awful mistake but in time she'd heal. They'd pet her and soothe her and send her back to England. But the porters were already dragging her suitcases onto on the quay, and Ibrahim was holding a hand out to her, smiling gently. He knew she was afraid. Come, he said. All is well.

Down on the quay Duncan Claybourne was hurrying off into the syrupy orange light of a Gulf afternoon, carrying a small leather hold-on. Was that all his luggage? It seemed very little for a man with a full-time posting.

They stayed at the Shatt al Arab Hotel in a room with a tiled floor that looked out at an island in the middle of the river. After a bath, Diane's energy recovered. She insisted on walking through her first Arab city.

Ibrahim took her elbow and steered her along the narrow streets beside the canals. Christian ladies rustled past in long silk dresses. Leathery-skinned pearl fishermen, their eyes milky from too much deep-water diving, chewed *kebat* outside the coffee shops. Jewish date-merchants strolled in pairs, deep in conversation, as water-taxis buzzed by, piled high with melons, bolts of silk, and boxes of dates, the passengers squeezed together amid their possessions. The men in the coffee-houses watched the crowds in contemplative torpor, their hookah pipes bubbling next to them.

She relished the thought of writing home about it. Perhaps she could sketch one of those corner shops whose wooden doors were hooked back to show dusty interiors stacked with rolls of cloth and barrels of grain? Or the creeks criss-crossed by bridges made from planks laid across old dhows roped together? How about those dark-skinned women who carried buckets on their heads, turquoise jewelry shining at their necks and wrists?

Ibrahim said that the women were descendants of African slaves.

"My God, Ibrahim, *no!*"

He laughed. "My God, yes. What do you expect?"

She had never seen an African before, except in films. Not that close, anyway. She noticed a blue-black brand on a woman's upper arm, but she didn't dare ask: he was lecturing her on the country's modern laws. There were no slaves, he assured her. There'd been a slave revolt over a thousand years ago, and the women she saw were free, although they still sang songs in Swahili. Did she know, by the way, that the word Swahili meant coast?

Later, in bed, he stroked her spine as he told her that Basra was corrupt. All coastal cities were. The dock workers diluted the kerosene with water, and the pearl traders smuggled guns. There wasn't much market for pearls any more, but the traders had kept their ships and their knowledge of currents, and had cousins on both sides of the river.

"How do you know all this?"

"Laila used to come down here to stop people smuggling antiquities. My sister is very brave."

While he slept, she listened to palm trees clattering in a breeze. Fruit fell with soft thuds to the ground. On the river, motor-boats took off at two in the morning, the men calling out to each other, and then there was a great clanking and rattling: the tankers were pulling up their

anchors, ready to steam out past the refineries at Abadan on the Persian side. She assumed, hour by hour, that she'd sleep, but she was still awake when the muezzins began at dawn.



Ibrahim had booked them a first class carriage. They shared it with a newly wed couple on their way back to Baghdad who were seen off by the brides' southern relatives. Women gathered on the platform like flocks of crows, breaking out into piercing ululations, their hands smacking at their mouths as little girls twirled in their party best, giddy with the sugar and unexpected fun. The groom looked sheepish and tugged at his beard. As the train pulled out, the new bride in her nylon dress leaned out of the carriage door and clutched the women's hands, laughing and crying at the same time. Mascara smudged beneath her eyes, turning her into a panda.

They were delighted to discover that Ibrahim and Diane were also newly married. An Englishwoman coming to live in Iraq! How brave she must be! Wouldn't she miss her family? Would her mother come and visit her soon? When Diane stiffened and said she thought not, they looked horrified. Of course she would!

Alongside the train tracks to Baghdad ran a single paved road. Tiny settlements, some no more than two houses and a goat, flashed by. Men in long robes crouched alongside the tracks, looking up. Diane looked back, refusing to turn away. There was no turning away now, not from anything.

In the early evening they entered a sprawling city flattened and battered by harsh winds. The buildings were pockmarked and the balconies shuttered, the wooden doors warped. Tattered posters were nailed to the wooden doors of locked-up shops. At the station, the porters fought over who would help with her suitcase while Ibrahim dug in his pocket for tips. Policemen in white stood at the roundabouts, giving furious blasts on their whistles as horse-drawn double-decker trams lumbered down the middle of scabbed boulevards.

They caught a taxi that was instantly stuck in traffic.

"Very bad road," said the driver, eyeing Diane in the rear-view mirror. "You London?"

"Yes."

"Is bad in London?"

Ibrahim said something in Arabic, and whatever it was, it made the driver fall quiet.

Once they left the station behind she saw shorter skirts and stylish shoes, ankles and collarbones. A young boy pushed through the crowds with a kerosene-fired refrigerator on his

back, dodging Fords and Citroens. A family squatted together on the doorstep of a hut next to a BP station. An old woman, immensely fat and swaddled in clothes like bandages, laughed at a huddle of young men standing beside her.

Finally they reached the alleyway down which lay the family home. Ibrahim recruited two boys to carry the suitcases. Diane picked her way through the rubbish. Her relief at seeing signs of a modern city was fast evaporating. She imagined all kinds of horrors behind the dark doors: broken floor boards, squat toilets, rats. Then Ibrahim stopped at a great carved door pressed into the wall at the end of the alley and tugged at a brass bell-pull, and the door was opened almost immediately by a beaming young woman: Souad, the sister he'd said was simple. She leapt towards her brother, covering his neck with kisses. Her eyes, which had white rims around the irises like a wild cat's, shone as she clasped him close. She patted Diane's cheeks, beaming with joyful approval, before pulling them inside.

They entered a dimly lit inner courtyard with hessian sacks leaning against the walls. These, Ibrahim told her, were stuffed with grain and dried fruits waiting to be collected for *zakhat*, his sisters' ritual act of charity. He touched one lightly as he passed, as if it were a child. They climbed a rickety wooden staircase to an inner balcony, where Souad disappeared into the dark at the back of the house. Diane and Ibrahim walked on to a door that led into a great reception room that looked out over the Tigris. Empire sofas were ranged along the walls, draped in lustrous shawls with long black fringes. On the floor lay overlapping Persian carpets in brilliant blood-reds and navy blue. Bavarian gold-rimmed crystal goblets clustered around a decanter on a side table, and carved benches beside the window were covered in rough woollen *killim*. Above the benches hung tattered mats of palm leaves, awaiting the burning summer months when they'd be soaked in water to keep the room cool.

It was obvious who Zubeida was: the plump widow in the middle of the largest sofa, flanked by two more daughters. All three women were dressed in black from head to toe and guarded on either side by framed photographs of the fallen father and husband.

Diane could tell that they'd been talking about her, greedily imagining the worst. Hanna and Bushra hugged their brother before greeting Diane with politely, but they couldn't disguise their gloating anticipation of disaster. Zubeida drew back into her cushions as if in horror, keeping her small, perfectly manicured hands curled on her lap like baby mice. She looked Diane up and down, her eyebrows raised at the sight of the sprigged Selfridge's frock with a wide leather belt, loose hair and high heels.

Laila arrived halfway through the inspection, vivid in a purple caftan, her hair swept back from a high forehead. She sat apart and lit a Sobranie, exhaling with a narrow-eyed expression of contempt.

Everyone spoke English out of deference to Diane. Souad served them coffee and sticky dates. The women were very adept, Diane noticed, at spitting the stones out into their hands and tipping them into ashtrays. She would have to learn to eat like that. Like a squirrel.

“My father’s a Rear Admiral,” said Diane. She was wondering where she and Ibrahim would sleep. “He’s sailed in this part of the world. And my sister knows Colonel Blair, the former port director at Basra.”

“Ah, Colonel Blair. I know him. He has a great deal to answer for,” said Laila.

Diane flushed with anger at this casual dismissal. Worse, Laila had turned away from Diane to tell Ibrahim about a site she’d recently visited in Syria. She’d stayed in the Baron Hotel in Aleppo, which was as handsome as the Pera Palace in Istanbul. She’d had to travel with a British team for her own protection, although she knew far more than them, but it had been worth it. There’d been a good haul. And one day an Englishwoman in a filthy dress shirt had heaved into camp, an Underwood typewriter stuffed into her donkey’s saddle-bag. Every morning, the staccato hammers of the keys and the bright *ting* of the carriage return rang out from the industrious visitor’s tent. At noon she’d stop and insist on a proper English breakfast, eggs and sausages trucked in from god knew where.

“Imagine!” she told Ibrahim, in exactly the same way he himself would say, *Imagine!* “It was Agatha Christie!” Laila was laughing. “Her books are terrible, *y’ayni!* Boiler pots! Ah, forgive me Diane, perhaps you like them?”

Diane had no chance to correct Laila, or to defend herself. Zubeida was murmuring in Arabic to her daughters. Ibrahim was reluctant to interpret his mother’s words, but Hanna was happy to do so.

“She’s saying that she sent her only son to England and he comes back with an English woman. Who would believe such a thing? She says there are many lovely Iraqi girls in Baghdad whose hearts are broken today.”

Hanna smiled primly, patting her newly permed hair. She was much prettier than the forbidding Laila or than pale, quiet Bushra, and Diane guessed that she never hesitated to take advantage of the fact. “I hope you don’t mind my telling you all this. My mother has found widowhood hard. She only says what she feels. You’ll have to forgive her. You are *tres jolie*, we can see that, but the truth is that we would never have chosen a British wife for our brother. I

*All The Men Are Dancing:*

*Extract for Stroud Book Festival Mainstream Fiction Competition 2019*

am not saying that you will not make my brother happy, but we think you have been lucky. Ibrahim is a very good man. *Il est un homme fidele – mukhalas*, we might say.”

Laila said coldly, “My sister spent two years at Beirut College and she’s been trying to speak French ever since.”

Diane could feel her face tightening. She’d been determined to be sweet and gracious, despite her fatigue, but she could see that would be impossible. She’d walked straight into a female war zone.