Suddenly, at half past two, there was activity at the cross-roads. Police began to talk urgently into their pocket radios, and positioned themselves at strategic positions.

A few people who had now been waiting nearly three hours ambled nearer the edge of the main road. In the distance a clatter of helicopter blades could be heard, then the wail of police sirens still far off but coming closer.

'He's on his way,' said Superintendent Eggleton. 'A few more minutes.'

An army helicopter appeared over the horizon, dipping low into the hills, followed by two police Bell 205s which criss-crossed the roads, fluttering hither and thither with machine-gunners at the ready. Then, cruising at 75 kilometres an hour in the middle of the road, were three police cars, followed by two Mercedes full of security men, six Cadillacs, one of which was flanked by a dozen motor-cycle outriders so it was impossible to see who was inside, then the Sultan's personal ambulance, and twenty-five other cars brimming with functionaries of one sort or another.

'It was the best day in the history of this country when that man came to the throne,' said Superintendent Eggleton as he watched the departing cavalcade. 'He's a wonderful man. The people here love this sort of thing, you know. They don't mind the waiting. They expect it. It's part of their tradition.'

It was with no feeling of revenge, or even a desire to satisfy tradition, that I later kept the Sultan waiting an hour and a half. I was having a leisurely talk at the American embassy prior to walking a few yards to the £3-million pink confection which the Sultan uses as his palace during his increasingly infrequent visits to Muscat when I was told our meeting would be at Sib, his more exotic £9-million palace forty kilometres away.

I assumed the last-minute change of plan had been made either for the security precautions vital to every autocrat or because His Majesty was playing on his garden lake with the electrically controlled toy boats which had lately become his favourite hobby.

'protect' the Sultan. Although such devoted service is appreciated, he does also travel with a number of bodyguards, once taking twenty-four to a private dinner party. When asked why he needed so many, he replied, 'They say I need them.'

'They' were Robert B. Anderson, a former secretary of the US Treasury and deputy secretary for defence, Yayha Omar, a Libyan entrepreneur on the diplomatic lists in Germany, Britain, and the United States who, according to some sources, has made $400 million in commission since 1970, and an unidentified former CIA man. The polite tussle between America and Britain for control of the Sultan's section of the money-rush course continues, whilst he gratifies his own castrated authority by personal extravagances which do not equal the vulgarity of some Saudis or Gulf Arabs but do provide a tempting target for have-nots in other parts of Arabia.

Sitting in a putrid refugee camp in Lebanon, it must be galling to hear about 'that Indian' ordering himself two dinner services worth £50000 each, specially built thrones from Essex and ultra-sophisticated electric organs, and building lavish air-conditioned sheds for his beloved Jersey cattle which he then allows visitors to watch through a one-way mirror as they are milked. His more ostentatious shopping sprees are not publicized in Oman, but a number of well-educated young Omanis are not thrilled to discover that in one day he spent $1·5 million at a Chicago firm buying six Cadillac Sevilles, one Eldorado, six Mercedes, two Porsches, a 25-foot speedboat, 1255 pieces of luggage, eight refrigerators, a gas range, three grapefruit trees, and two La-Z-Boy reclining chairs. He is also criticized for buying hundreds of silk shirts at a time.

Some misunderstandings arise from a puritanical assumption in the West that extravagance is not a fit subject for jokes, and, anyway, Arabs are humourless so what they say must be taken literally. Ordering £18000 worth of perfume at Harrod's, the Sultan was warned by an assistant that it would evaporate. 'Don't worry, it's for the bath,' he replied. And when his private VC10 was delayed on the runway for three hours during a strike at London's Heathrow, he relayed a message to the control tower asking how much it would cost to buy the airport. These were not meant as serious remarks, but they were

reported as such and given credence by the genuine arrogance with which the Sultan sometimes disguises his feelings of inferiority. 'I am Sultan. I can do what I like,' he told an adviser, and was nonplussed when this sort of remark was passed on to the Jordanians. When he went to thank them for their help during the Dhofar war, a senior official said, 'We wanted to see you in order to find out if you really were mad.'

The Shah is much more amenable, perhaps because he shares an enthusiasm for heritage. They see themselves as a couple of aristocrats amidst the parvenus, and when the Sultan went to Persepolis he was acknowledged as a real king compared to the Gulf rulers who were treated like Arabs. Both have a love of dignity, military parades, and a regal lifestyle which demands numerous residences. The Sultan has an £800000 Georgian manor house in Wargrave, Berkshire, as well as a 4000-acre estate near Berchtesgaden which he bought for a trifling $4 million. It is a surprising location for such a self-proclaimed Anglophile, but he sends his wife and mother there for the summer. Occasionally, as in 1976, he appears to 'forget' to recall them and they await his pleasure whilst the winter snow begins to fall. In addition, he has three palaces in northern Oman and two in Salalah, most of them bristling with closed-circuit television equipment, and decorated in opulent repro with a touch of the Indian bazaar and 1930s Hollywood kitsch. 'It took Louis XIV years and years to build Versailles,' observes a diplomat, 'but modern techniques are quicker, and he seems to be making full use of them.'

'I don't have many palaces,' says the Sultan. 'This one [in Muscat] is the palace of state, not my personal one. You must have a suitable place to greet visitors, otherwise we would be accused of being bedouin and not knowing how to entertain people. I inherited Sib, and in Salalah I have the so-called castle which is also government owned.'

It is indelicate to point out that he is in fact the government. When he disappears to Salalah, as he does for increasingly lengthy periods, cheques are not signed for months, causing even the largest multinational firms temporary cash-flow problems. Maybe there will come a time when Oman is 'ready' for democracy. What does he say to that?

'We should think of democracy as people having a greater say about what goes on in their own country and being free to express the way they feel. We are preparing ourselves for this, but we are not going to import a particular form of democracy. I think that is very dangerous. We read about India, where everyone said that British democracy succeeded . . . look at what happened. No. I think we should adapt democracy to our country, rather than try to import someone else's version.

'Our hopes for the future are great. So far, the things we have done with oil money are non-productive. We had to develop fast. Now we are concentrating more on industry and agriculture and soon we will be able to feed ourselves without imports. We have fisheries, mineral resources and so on. We have an endless source of limestone from one end of the country to another. So oil is not everything.

'But I think the biggest jewel of the last few years has been our progress in education. We are educating everyone, and that is a question of guidance. We don't want people to forget their religion or their traditions. We don't want them to think that everything in the past is bad. In some places this has happened, and people have fallen into the modern world without guidance. They thought everything new was good and everything old was bad. Well, we are steering our ship.

'Revolution? In the modern world it is something which attracts some people. But revolutions only function when there is a base. I don't think there is a base here. A few people will try to put ideas into the heads of others, but the Omanis will not be attracted to such ideas, so long as they are satisfied with their ruler.'

At present they are. But the money rush builds expectations which it can never satisfy and creates a desire for freedom incompatible with the Sultan's autocracy. Unlike the Saudis, his capacity to bribe the opposition is slipping away with his rapidly decreasing oil reserves and he is not strong enough to deter the Russians, who bide their time with covetous menace in South Yemen.

For Oman the money rush may be a chimerical glint in a long history of foreign oppression and its gentle people will once more be buffeted by the turbulence of international politics.

Sometimes they think they might make their country a tourist centre so they can be independent of oil money. The world's most expensive Holiday Inn squats waiting on the ocean sands at Salalah and more hotels are planned. Yet tourism means unrestricted entry, a thought that appals the Sultan's instinct for self-preservation as much as it offends his people's sense of tranquillity. A group of Egyptian businessmen came to Salalah one day to meet local dignitaries and spent the whole lunchtime enthusing about how they could turn the picturesque and peaceful coastline into a resort just like La Baule in northern France – hotels, funfairs, chalets, and restaurants. They were not well received.

Some intrepid tourists have already arrived. As I left Muscat to visit the money rush's richest self-made man, I met an American couple who had diverted to Oman from a package tour of the Middle East. They were anxious to rejoin their group but, as happens frequently, the plane was delayed and tempers were frayed. 'I wish those damned niggers behind the counter would get on with it,' muttered the woman, whilst her husband stood stolidly looking out of the airport window. Suddenly the woman gave a shriek, and rushed to her husband. 'My God,' she said, 'look over there. In our seat. By our baggage.' The husband glanced to where he had piled their belongings. Sitting nearby was an Arab with a falcon tied to his wrist.

'Yes, dear?'

'There's a damned nigger in our seat with a parrot on his arm . . .'

A guide and driver provided by the government whisked me away and, ignoring strictly imposed speed regulations, we arrived at Sib half an hour after the scheduled time. Guards lolling against the gate were pleasant, hospitable, and delighted to talk to someone. His Majesty, though, was in Muscat so far as they knew. Back we sped, the guide and driver arguing, sweating, hurling tearful recriminations at each other followed by sullen accusations until they turned to reassure me. 'No problem, no problem,' they said, and started once more to argue.

There was no problem. The Sultan, hearing of the dilemma, had switched around a few ambassadors so our discussion could take place immediately I arrived, a gracious honour from a man who is also prime minister, foreign minister, defence minister, and the fourteenth hereditary successor to one of the oldest regal dynasties in Arabia (see Appendix).

He is an impressive-looking man dressed in long Arab robes enhanced by a vivid coloured silk turban, and a *khanja* at the waist: tall, full-bearded, with alert intelligent eyes. His lips give a hint of sulkiness, of quick temper or determination, and it is easy to believe he was only just dissuaded by British Foreign Office pressure from bombing Aden in 1976 and precipitating a quick end to his own particular money rush. Yet, when I saw him later in Iran, he was dressed in a Western suit and looked less impressive: slightly balding and nondescript, too meek to cope with the eighteen wives ascribed to him inaccurately by a British newspaper.[4] Americans, too, have found him ineffectual and nervous on his trips to Washington. He is more relaxed with his Lebanese or British aides, one of whom had dressed in a dark grey civil-service type suit to be present at our discussion.

'Throughout our history,' said the Sultan, 'we have been friends of Britain. I admire the British because they are loyal. Secondly, it is a nation which takes things rather quietly. The British don't shout, and that is something I admire. They have a very calm way of doing things. As long as we need assistance and the British are prepared to give it, we will have it. We rely on them, and they are very welcome, but our people are being more and more trained and Omanization is taking place.'

It may not seem that way, with British running the country, Iranians defending it, and Saudis paying for it.

18

Sweets for the Children

'Be reasonable and choose the right path: either an honourable life under Qabus, or death and decay with Godless communism.'
Leaflet dropped by Omani planes over Dhofar in 1973

'It is difficult to find a man to feed the child's mind. A teacher can be a dangerous man.'
AHMED GHAZALI
Omani Minister of Education

'People make mistakes,' admitted the Sultan as we sat in his Muscat palace, 'and mistakes were made, but not to the extent that others imagine. We went faster than perhaps we should have done in normal circumstances, but we were fighting a war at the same time as trying to develop a country.'

Development was begun by an interim planning council presided over by Defence Secretary Colonel Oldman, which immediately transferred a road contract from a German to a British firm, planned a new town in an airless, waterless valley miles from anywhere except army headquarters, and summoned Qaboos' uncle Tariq from Germany, where he had been since 1958 in amiable, self-imposed exile with a German wife (two Omani ones stayed at home), to be prime minister, and thus prevent him from becoming a focus for revolt.

Fortunately, the Al bu Sa'ids have outgrown the traditional Arab ruling family's obsession with slaughtering each other, and Sa'id bin Taimur's four brothers, each by a different mother, are uncompetitive. The eldest, Majid, is half black and considered low down the social scale. As governor of Mutrah, he is

content to be as helpful as possible. One day he arrested some gold smugglers, and proudly exhibited their loot in his office until requested to return it because the smugglers were influential. 'Majid is all right,' says Tariq. 'He is not corrupt in the normal way.'

Tariq, the brightest, has a Turkish mother and was educated in Turkey and at Heidelberg University. In the Second World War he served in the Indian Army, good training for battling against the rebels in Dhofar when, equipped with two retainers carrying his personal bren gun, he followed troops on manoeuvres. Unfortunately, Sa'id kept him so short of money that every Christmas he had to present himself at Salalah to be given a cash gift. This became increasingly niggardly, so he bought a couple of broken-down army lorries and set up as a contractor, eventually moving to Germany after a series of disagreements. He enjoys music, but his main loves are bridge and gambling – to such an extent that one of his friends alleges he put his last £1000 on a single number at roulette. It came up, giving him £35 000 profit.

He had never met his nephew Qaboos, and was alarmed to discover that they trusted each other slightly less than they trusted the British. Qaboos refused to let him have access to any financial details, because, he said, the oil concession was in the name of the Sultan personally. So they both sanctioned projects, without consultation, Tariq spending vast amounts in an unsuccessful attempt to force Qaboos to reveal how much was available. When Tariq resigned in December 1971, a number of companies realized why they had not received written confirmation of oral agreements. Tariq left hundreds of letters unopened and wrote to no one because he did not even have a secretary.

The rift between uncle and nephew did not last and Tariq, who now calls himself the *éminence grise*, was made chairman of the Central Bank and his daughter married Qaboos. The former putative, or actual, father-in-law is under house arrest in Salalah.

In spite of initial problems, the Sultan was determined to create a proper government, and he began to make all the appointments that a Bedfordshire County Council course would

presumably consider necessary. He asked an oil company executive to be minister of social services and labour.

'What are social services?' asked the aspirant minister.

The Sultan thought for a moment and then replied, 'I don't know. No one has ever asked me that before.'

At least he tried, and in some ways the country is more liberal and progressive than its neighbours. An ecological balance in the south which has not been disturbed for two thousand years is being preserved. Ministers are often young and enthusiastic. Alcohol is allowed, although it is controlled by means of a police permit which costs £15 a month.

But the most noticeable difference between Oman and other Arab countries in the money rush, except Iraq, is female emancipation. Less than a decade ago Omani women were as shut-off as their Saudi counterparts are today. Colonel Smiley, former head of the Sultan's army, recalls, 'On one of my visits to Sohar I had to bring back in my aeroplane a fourteen-year-old girl with the face of an angel who had been shot in the stomach by her brother "for looking at a man". She lay silent and uncomplaining on her stretcher and died before we landed. Her brother went unpunished.'

Anomalies still exist – a girl traditionally 'belongs' to the son of the father's brother and he must give permission if she wishes to marry someone else–but prejudices are being obliterated within a generation, and working women are accepted and encouraged. Lyutha Sultan al Mugheri, a thirty-year-old television and radio director, says, 'We couldn't suppress women here now because everyone is needed to help develop the country. I have a lot of men working for me, and they are proud that there is a woman who can actually do something.'

Most Omani women are unveiled, and take part in normal life, frequently becoming senior to men. They are provided with sex advice columns in local newspapers which would make Saudis froth with indignation. 'Shy wife and happy sex,' says one headline. 'A thirty-two-year-old woman, mother of two children aged thirteen and ten, came to me with a strange problem. She confided that she had lost all sexual desire. Her husband felt her emancipation was the cause of their sexual

disharmony.' There are pictures of women's football teams with a promise that soon such wanton entertainment will be a normal part of Omani life. 'The day is not far off when in every country women will work and play side by side with males as equal members of society.'

The Sultan's wife still appears veiled in public. He says 'She is new on the scene. I am sure she will do things in her own time. There are no obstacles to women's progress. I think we should let things take their natural course without shouting about it too much. That might create different attitudes, and perhaps make it more difficult.'

The pressures caused by dramatic change in a society like Oman produce inevitable contradictions, and there is a likeable simplicity which can be harmless if it is not disillusioned too soon. Ahmed Ghazali, the thirty-year-old minister of education, emanates optimism with all the energy of an idealistic young schoolmaster. His family left Oman for Zanzibar when he was nine, and he has only just returned.

'As we are modernized we are in danger of throwing away our traditions so I am trying to make students understand that to be modern and educated does not necessarily mean they have to overthrow. Many of our students think they have to wear trousers, drink, and smoke in order to become modern. In our schools, they must wear the *dishdasha*, even foreigners. There is nothing wrong with traditional clothes.

'Education isn't everything, and who says it gives you a good life? In England over half a million well educated people are unemployed. What is the point of education if that happens? In this office, for instance, I could get a computer and do things quicker and cheaper. But I would throw three hundred people out of work. Where would they go? When people are unemployed they sit and think, and what do you expect them to do? They destroy things.

'We can't protect our students from the bad side of modern life. You can't stop movies or television, but we can make them work in a helpful way and we can choose what we show. There are good American detective films, taken from police records, which can help. So much Western material is unrealistic. You see, for instance, a man walking down a street. He meets a girl,

and two days later they marry. These things never really happen, do they? I don't like to see kissing in the streets. I was in Paris, and saw a boy and girl kissing at traffic lights. It's terrible. It's not the place and it doesn't have the mood. I try to be strict in making our students behave well. It's better to be ignorant and polite than educated with no manners.

'I hope the mistakes we make will be new ones of our own, because we are trying to experiment for ourselves. We are building a new generation to take our place and we know that the pen can lead them to a prison or a palace. It is for them to choose and if we don't make them right then one day they will destroy us. I am sure of that.'

The money rush nearly did. It hit Oman as the country was struggling to develop, and seemed like a miraculous remedy for every bottleneck and delay. Income rose from $226 million in 1973 to $1·02 billion the following year, most paid direct to the Sultan who distributed it to ministries according to his own preferences. Oil revenues are still paid direct to him, and the amount is a closely guarded secret. In 1978 he received about $1·5 billion.

The bonanza was followed by massive overspending and uncontrolled extravagance as ministers realized that the way to increase their budget was to tempt the Sultan with a prestige project and promise it could be finished as a birthday present by National Day. A television system was introduced in 1974 at far greater cost than necessary, although the TV station in Muscat remains a source of great pride and is a ritual stop for state visitors (the German engineers disappear to the background during these occasions, and Omanis are seen to be in control). Pipeline worth $50 million was ordered, and left to rust because there was no available project and no one could decide what to do with it. A desalination plant estimated at $57 million was rushed through on the promise that it would be ready for National Day 1975 and would provide the Sultan's garden at Sib with a million gallons of water a day. Eventually the cost was $300 million, it had to be closed down for technical reasons, and water and power in Oman cost about five times

as much as necessary. Electricity costs the average household about £50 a week during the hottest months of the summer. The *falaj* system of underground waterways, built painstakingly by the Persians nearly two thousand years ago and still in use elsewhere, has been neglected, and boreholes were sunk indiscriminately without thought for the future.

There were so many crooks in the planning office that the same land was sold several times to different buyers and some found they had no access except through other people's gardens. Contracts were signed willy-nilly and, as in other money-rush countries, there was something for everyone. A Japanese firm unsuccessful in competing for a television station in Salalah suggested they should organize the fishing concession instead. Experience was unimportant, and corruption was part of everyday life. 'The Sultan refers to it as "sweets for the children",' said one bank manager. 'On some road-building contracts there is a fifty per cent mark-up for commission. Naturally it is always denied and is done carefully enough to be unprovable in law, but protestations of innocence from Arabs leave me unmoved. As a banker you see these things. Everyone is involved, including British advisers.'

The Sultan is more circumspect. 'One can't be a hundred per cent sure there is no bribery. Maybe one in a hundred puts something in his pocket. I would not swear it did not happen, but not in a big way. And people know here that if they do wrong they will be punished. There is no doubt about it.'

The biggest extravagance was military. The communist-backed Dhofar rebellion did not end officially until 30 April 1976. The Shah promised a squadron of Phantoms, in addition to troops from the Imperial Iranian Task Force, but insisted on a proper airfield. A 4000-metre runway was constructed at Thumrait within nine months regardless of expense. Cement was flown from Alaska, and the total cost was $145 million. The Iranian Air Force used it once during the following year.

In 1974 the Sultan ordered Jaguar aircraft and a Rapier guided-missile system, both considered beyond Oman's needs by military experts and even the British who sold them. 'The early warning system might hold up the Shah, or whoever, for

five minutes,' says a senior British diplomat. 'However, everyone's got this sort of stuff and I'd much rather they had our version than the French one.'

The Sultan, like a fifteen-year-old boy about to drive a Formula One racing car, does not agree the equipment is too sophisticated. 'If you look at things militarily, what you use today will be obsolete in two or three years' time,' he says. 'It's better to buy something really up to date so you can use it for the next ten years. If you get anything less you will soon be far behind.' Nevertheless, in a tacit admission that he was too extravagant he restricted government spending in July 1974 – only to commit a further £200 million to his air defences two months later. He is proud of his military knowledge and takes his authority seriously. When he announced that he was dividing his forces into three separate branches, a colleague joked, 'I suppose you will have uniforms made as Admiral of the Fleet, Marshal of the Royal Air Force, and Commander-in-Chief?'

'I already have,' replied the Sultan gravely.

The RAF left Masira, a base they had established as an emergency landing ground in 1932, on 31 March 1977. The Sultan gave them a five o'clock celebration tea party, and denied he was letting the Americans take over to monitor Russian movements in the Indian Ocean. He began to establish links with the Chinese, though, and is determined to appear independent and strong, hence an armoury which takes at least forty per cent of the country's budget and phoney statistics which boost the population from a reliable estimate of 500 000 to nearer 750 000 in official pronouncements.

The stockpiling of weapons is paralleled by nervousness about his personal safety, for which he takes precautions of a less tangible nature. Superstition forbids him to travel on certain days of the week – it used to be Fridays, now it is Wednesdays – and a woman from the interior with psychic powers was paid an under-secretary's salary, given a Mercedes, and interpreted his dreams. His mysticism is at a more primitive level than the Shah's and therefore easier to manipulate. One senior minister, closely associated with a British contracting company, wears armbands with 'magical' symbols designed to