

Wishbone and Jungle Jap

'It works in the jungle, it works in the desert, it works everywhere.'

ADNAN KHASHOGGI
quoted in Fortune, June 1977

'I have heard disturbing reports that Khashoggi just bullshits you.'

STANLEY SPORKIN
*Director for the Securities and Exchange Commission
Enforcement Division*

The telephone call came through to London just before midnight on Saturday. 'This is Bob Shaheen. Would you be able to see the chief tomorrow morning at about ten o'clock?'

'Yes. Where?'

'In Cannes.'

For Adnan Khashoggi, Saudi Arabia's most visible multinational entrepreneur, distance and time are irrelevant. He travels sixty thousand miles a month in his green and white Boeing 727 (gold coloured - *not* gold-plated - bathroom fittings, telexes, six colour televisions with video cassettes, separate wardrobes for Cifonelli suits and gold-embroidered *thobes*), an updated bedou flitting from one continent to another arranging deals, smoothing problems, allegedly bribing government officials, and surrounding himself and his clients with conspicuous symbols of status like yachts, expensive cars, beautiful women, and hospitality on a scale which impresses the most dour bankers as much as it alarms their blue-rinsed wives.

'People are hypocrites,' he says. 'They don't know how to
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live. Many of them would like to live as I do, but they don't dare. They are afraid of what others would say. I enjoy living pleasantly. I can afford it. I have worked hard for it. Why should I deprive myself? In the beginning there was hostility in Saudi Arabia because they thought I was exposing myself too much. Now they have become used to it. I'm not afraid. I have nothing to hide. Whatever I enjoy, others enjoy with me.'

After the first blast of Riyadh self-righteousness, he is a refreshing change. His uninhibited life-style, the basis for Harold Robbins' book *The Pirate*, is financed by a reputed \$500 million in profits over the last few years (\$200 million in 1977 alone) and makes him one of the few identifiable targets for snipers who lie along the route of the money rush, as well as a potential all-purpose saviour. He nearly prevented British financier Jim Slater from falling to disgrace in a heap of debts. During a series of meetings in Beirut and Paris in 1975, he offered to buy Sir James Goldsmith's twenty per cent holding in Slater Walker, plus a further five per cent, for £7 million – enough to ensure the company's survival. However, according to Slater sources, he could not provide the £2 million cash needed to implement the deal and asked them to arrange finance, an impossibility for a firm already in a morass of difficulties. Khashoggi's aides have a different interpretation: asking for finance he knew would not be forthcoming was a tactful way out of an overpriced deal. It is at least a refinement on the usual method of polite smiles and promises for *bukra*.

As I flew to meet him, a British columnist had written that he had 'abducted' his five children from his wife Soraya (née Sandra Jarvis-Daly of Leicester, whom he married when she was seventeen); and a rival newspaper was about to disclose that 'London's newest night-club, *Le Privé*, designed to become the capital's most exclusive joint, opened last year. Fabled Arabian "Mr Fixit" Adnan Khashoggi is said to be one of the names barred from membership. This might be because he is a flashy Arab.'¹

It was mid-afternoon in September, the best time for the Riviera, and Mr Robert Shaheen sat in his room at the Majestic

Hotel in Cannes with all the curtains drawn and shutters closed. He wondered aloud, yet again, about criticism which always envelopes his boss. Once he searched for a comparison. 'It happened to Caesar, to Jesus, and it happens today when a man has great visions and dares to be different.'

Five identical black briefcases with combination locks were stacked on a dressing-room table. He used to travel with twenty-six – one for each letter of the alphabet. In spite of the reduction, he claims that within minutes he can provide any relevant information to Khashoggi, whom he calls the chief. 'It sounds more pleasant than "boss", less authoritarian, and reveals his character. The chief is the most wonderful, kind person. He is wise, and a true believer in the golden rule. Quite a guy – as you will see. But you will have one problem. You are going to like him.'

Shaheen is tall and immaculate in a three-piece, pin-striped suit which he wears everywhere, including the desert. He feels such formality indicates that he is always on duty – thus allowing the chief time to relax. 'I try never to be in the way, and never out of the way.'

An American of Syrian descent, he has been Khashoggi's amanuensis since the early days, and he gives a deceptive impression of being an old-fashioned courtier who stretches hyperbole about his boss into the realms of fantasy. He is a yes-man only in public, disagreeing and giving shrewd advice in private.

Like others in the Khashoggi entourage, he exudes 'B' movie bonhomie but, for all the apparent openhandedness, he is cautious about publicity. Discussing an article on Khashoggi about to appear in the *National Enquirer*, he mused, 'I need something for the middle classes. They are apt to be misled by talk of scandal.' Employees now have to sign a four-page closely typed contract agreeing not to disclose any information whatsoever about the company – even the existence of the contract.

Shaheen, making telephone calls to all parts of the world from his Cannes bedroom, taped some of them on a pocket recorder 'so the chief can get the full measure of the conversation, and not just a summary', and glanced through a book

he was reading, *Looking Out for Number One*. 'He hits home in a few places.'

He does not really need guidance on the subtleties of the money rush, the gestures which separate winners from losers. He has picked up a number of tips over the years. When Khashoggi is entertaining at a restaurant, Shaheen excuses himself towards the end, nips round the back to settle the account, and then returns nonchalantly to the table. Lo, there will be no embarrassing rustle of paper money, no signing of credit cards or cheques. It is a scrap of etiquette he learned from the governor of Mecca himself, Prince Fawwaz bin Abdulaziz. 'That's elegance . . . class,' he explains. 'That's what separates us from those who believe we are merely ostentatious.'

The telephone rang. It was the chief, checking a few details, fixing appointments, and making arrangements for a dinner party on board his yacht that evening.

'Go back to your room,' said Mr Shaheen. 'You are now in a holding pattern.'

The short trip was a misery for Bob Shaheen, nattily attired in his working suit. He doesn't much like the sea, and ducked as the speedboat zoomed through the harbour exit, heading over the choppy Mediterranean to where the cruiser lay at anchor a few hundred yards away.