

and there should be at least one place in the world where good manners are important. There is so much bad behaviour in the world, and it is all because of the Jewish influence.'

'You must be joking,' I said, although I knew he was not.

'The Jews are enemies of humanity, and their aim is to pull everyone down into materialism. They control the mass media, the banks . . . everything.'

How strange that extreme godliness and prejudice should be such frequent partners, but we had wandered from the subject of sex segregation.

'There will never be co-education in this country,' exclaimed Shaikh Nassar. 'In the last seventeen years we have had good control, and it is getting better all the time. Things may be different in Oman and Bahrain, but these countries were under British colonization, so new ideas were introduced. The hope is now that they are independent they will come to the right Islamic solution.'

The smell became more intense with each step nearer the bathroom. It was like methylated spirit, but sweeter and more powerful, strong enough to bring a tear to the eye, and an involuntary twitch to the nose. Outside, the temperature rose to 120 degrees and the small estate of box-like houses shimmered in the heat.

Most people slept as the sluggish afternoon drifted on. But in his bathroom, the senior executive of one of Europe's largest companies, a gastronome and habitué of prestigious restaurants, was dressed in sky-blue underpants and apron. One white handkerchief was tied round his forehead as a makeshift sweatband. Another covered his nose and mouth to keep out fumes which rose venomously from three pink plastic buckets on the floor. They were one-third filled with a colourless liquid, almost pure alcohol, called *sediki* (Arabic for 'my friend') to which he added water, stirred, tasted, grimaced, and spat.

In the kitchen his wife kept watch over two pressure-cookers containing a boiling mixture of sugar and water, the basic ingredients. She looked nervously out of the window whenever a car drove along the unmade road, and her relief showed when it

passed by, obscured in a cloud of dust within a few seconds. Her husband was considered one of the leading brewers in the Arabian peninsula, his *sediki*-based gin and whisky sometimes indistinguishable from the genuine variety, and his wines compared favourably to some adequate French vintages. But if his ability was recognized by the Saudi police, the dismissal from his firm would be as instant as the humiliation of their expulsion from a country where alcohol is allegedly banned.

It has always been forbidden to Muslims, but the founder of Saudi Arabia, King Ibn Saud, allowed foreigners to import it for their own use as the country developed during the 1930s. This concession stopped in 1952 when one of his sons, Mishari (see Appendix), shot and killed the British *chargé d'affaires* who had ordered him to leave a party for being drunk. Mishari is now a businessman, his life saved because the widow declined his head, which was offered by Ibn Saud, as well as blood money of £70 000. But after the tragedy, the King banned the import of liquor 'as the mother of crimes and the basis of all corruption'. Now even boats are launched with bottled water from the Gulf.

The penalty for drinking or providing alcohol is severe, public lashings followed by imprisonment, but implementation is selective. A few days after I arrived a Dutch tugboat captain had been sentenced to 200 strokes of the cane and ten months in prison for failing to seal his drinks cabinet on arrival at the eastern port of Dammam, and two Britons were about to suffer the same fate for selling home-made alcohol to Muslims.

At the time, however, I was sipping a refreshing gin and tonic at Zaki Yamani's Riyadh home, served to me by his personal assistant Lord Patrick Beresford (old Etonian, former Royal Horse Guards officer, polo-playing friend of Prince Philip's, brother of the Marquis of Waterford – all the gossip column trimmings. Yamani apparently started a trend for hiring sprigs of the British aristocracy: King Khalid's boat captain is Sir John Onslow).

Every day, Saudi Arabian airports are clogged with the paraphernalia of sophisticated Western domesticity such as vacuum cleaners, refrigerators, deep-freezes, video cassettes, blue movies, hi-fi sets of such 'impedance' and 'ohms' as to tax the hearing of the most acutely audio-sensitive dog, sickly



confectionery to glutinize the minds of educated Saudi women condemned to suffer sanctified humiliations, and boxes labelled simply FURNITURE. These are collected by the élite, sometimes summoned discreetly to the airport by deferential customs officials with the warning, 'Your furniture is leaking,' before the elixir from bottles of finest Glenlivet or Chivas Regal, unhappily broken en route, reaches the nostrils of the less fortunate.

Even foreign diplomats have to be careful. They dispose of empties by crushing them into small pieces and returning them in the diplomatic bag, or dropping them into the Red Sea during boating 'picnics'. Meanwhile, the 'furniture' cartons have a more practical use as makeshift living accommodation for low-paid expatriate Arab and Pakistani workers.

For those unable to obtain whisky or to pay the black market price of £50 a bottle, *sediki* can be a pleasant alternative. It has been brewed in Saudi Arabia for centuries, but achieved the status of a Western art when expatriates worried about the lethally explosive potential of home-made alcohol, issued a thirty-three-page booklet of instructions and diagrams known as *The Blue Flame*. This describes the setting up of a 'sneaky home still which can be stored in a dresser drawer and yields an acceptable product in one run' or the more complicated 'fractional distillation still' and has become a much prized literary achievement unobtainable today. 'The prohibition is sternly enforced, especially by adherents of the Islam (Moslem) religion. Hence, take care of this booklet and remember discreet handling is mandatory.'

It provides recipes for everything from absinth (136 degrees proof), cointreau 1 and 2, vodka ('pour 100 proof *sediki* into a vodka bottle'), wines, and kahlua ('mix one pound of drip coffee with 1½ quarts of water. Boil and simmer slowly for forty minutes. Strain through cheesecloth. This will make about one cup of concentrate. Cool and add 1-1½ quarts of 180 proof *sediki*, plus two ounces of vanilla extract'). The booklet observes that 'those of us who have spent time in Saudi Arabia discovered that there was a generous quantity and wide variety of alcohol available, even though it was absolutely forbidden to possess, sell, carry, drink, or manufacture it.

Moreover, we discovered it was of excellent quality, nearly hangover-proof, and every ounce manufactured in almost any household kitchen. The preparation was a respected secret, yet eagerly shared with good friends.'

The party that evening was a farewell to the managing director of an arms manufacturing firm, and a number of prominent members of the European and American community had been invited, but no Saudis. A Lockheed executive observed, 'We used to invite them to our parties, but they were always getting drunk and pushing each other into the pool. It was terrible. In all my time here I've only known one top Saudi who did not drink. You daren't invite them home, because they only come for the booze, and you can never get rid of them.'

An ambassador added, 'You have a lot of drunkenness and all the evils of prohibition here, although it's not so bad as Chicago in the Al Capone days. Many of the princes would like a glass of beer after playing tennis, but whisky is much cheaper to transport, because of its size, and so they have that or nothing.'

A side effect of state-administered asceticism is the character change it creates in those exposed to it. The 'just a sweet sherry at Christmas' man starts to pant for a large whisky. The faithful husband lusts for the most bizarre offerings of 42nd Street or Soho. The casual eater will not rest until seated in front of the best the Tour d'Argent can provide.

Meanwhile, however, they creep back to the womb of a hotel and sit in the lobby drinking Pepsi-Cola (Coke is on the Arab boycott list), playing chess, and listening to each other's exaggerations whilst they await the only live entertainment of the day: mealtime.

At least eight Pakistani waiters, immaculate in green or red jackets, hover, impatient to please. But only one man is qualified to take orders for the set menu of junk food - usually described as chicken or beef - and he wears a dinner jacket à la mode to give credibility to an otherwise undistinguished intellect. He has a large pad and numerous pieces of carbon paper, and scatters sheets to various waiters, keeping one for himself which he personally delivers to a man seated behind a

dirty and stained yellow curtain at the side of the dining-room: the cashier.

Diners, invariably depressed by the day's events, clutch their bottled water (£1 a litre), or the more expensive Schloss Boosenburg ('alcohol-free sparkling grape drink, a product of Germany'), and await something they have not ordered, followed by profuse apologies and much head-striking from the head waiter who appears terminally panic-stricken minutes after opening time.

One lunchtime, when the food was more than normally unappetizing and the head waiter more than normally apologetic, he murmured, 'Tonight you must have champagne.'

Champagne? In Riyadh? Nonsense. Then I recalled a rumour, dismissed at the time, that Crown Prince Fahd, himself no stranger to Western delights, had hinted to hotel-keepers that perhaps, on occasions, guests could be offered a drink.

That evening, edgy with anticipation, I sat myself at a corner table, slightly hidden behind a pillar, and was greeted immediately by the head waiter prancing with enthusiastic delight, who licked his pencil, wrote on his notepad, stood still, arched his back, and breathed 'Champagne' so that it sounded like the dying sigh of an orgasmic frog.

He toddled off, distributing parts of his notepad to bowing waiters.

The champagne arrived at the same time as the soup (an unidentifiable taste camouflaged with noodles), and had been poured into a large jug, half full of ice, and topped with a piece of lemon. This, presumably, was to avoid the scandal a genuine bottle would cause.

I smiled as I poured the first gentle drops, and I felt a temporary touch of guilt at not sharing my secret with the Texan electronics salesman who had two bottles of Bourbon confiscated at the airport but still called everyone - including the waiters - 'shaikh'. The wine hit the glass, and bubbles sparkled upwards - slightly anaemic, and there was a yellowish colour, but I attributed this to the lemon.

A sip, swilling it around to let the taste buds appreciate fully this unexpected delight . . .

'Good?' asked the head waiter.



'It tastes like apple juice,' I said.

'Oh no, sir. It *is* apple juice, but it has things added.'

'What things?'

'Perrier water. Saudi champagne is perrier water and apple juice.'

I paid the bill - £5 - and walked out of the hotel into an evening heat that felt oppressive as lukewarm blancmange. What I needed, I thought, was a call from the chief.