

He looked startled. Like many non-royal ministers, he has a foreign wife – Almira, a twenty-seven-year-old paediatrician. The Establishment is not keen on such dilution of scarce Saudi blood, and special permission is required to marry non-Saudi women. ‘What is wrong with our attitude towards women?’

‘They have to remain veiled outside the house, cannot drive a car. . . .’

‘But aren’t there some women in the West who do not drive?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well?’

‘They are allowed to.’

‘What does that signify? More accidents. You must see the advantages of our attitude towards women. We have perhaps the lowest divorce rate in the world, the best family ties . . .’

‘The divorce rate is low because you can have several wives without divorcing them.’

‘Yes, but polygamy is not necessarily the fashion these days. It is permitted – as it is by the Mormons in the United States\* – but few practise it. It is no longer possible to maintain four wives, especially as Islam makes you treat each one equally. Anyway, to talk about women is raising the issue at the wrong time. There are women here, and men, who are not trained.’

I met him a few weeks later in London, where he was giving a speech. Everyone else began, ‘Brothers, sisters . . .’ The planning minister for Saudi Arabia hesitated, looked around his audience of which about a third were women, looked down at his hands, coughed, and began, ‘Brothers.’

The weight of tradition hangs heavy, and it will take more than a few years of Western influence to change it.

\* This is a common misapprehension in Saudi Arabia.

## 13

# The Leaking Furniture of Riyadh

'It will probably take fifty years to liberate all Arab women, and the Saudi men will be the last in the world to give in. But it's bound to come.'

JEHAN SADAT

*wife of the Egyptian President*

'In no case may men and women commingle in the place of work or in the accessory facilities or other appurtenances thereto.'

*Saudi Labour Law, Chapter X, Article 160*

By the swimming pool of the Beirut hotel sits a beautiful olive-skinned woman, plump breasts cascading firmly into a small bikini bra, thick black hair falling on her slim shoulders, and a smile of gentle contentment on her face. Her back is stroked with sun oil by a British salesman.

She is a twenty-three-year-old Saudi Arabian who was married at fourteen to a cousin thirty years older, and comes to Beirut twice a year with her husband's approval 'to relax'. Few things are as they seem in the money rush, as the salesman has discovered. A brief affair with a raunchy married Saudi woman had been beyond his most outrageously optimistic thoughts.

They were discreet. Apart from mornings at the pool they had only been seen publicly on one occasion. That was when Princess Misha, granddaughter of Ibn Saud's eldest surviving son, Mohammed (see Appendix) and her boy friend joined them for dinner at a restaurant. Misha, also twenty-three and married, was a lively, pretty girl who seemed very much in love with her boy friend, the cousin of a Saudi diplomat.

The salesman and the Saudi woman parted after three days to return to their different worlds: she to another spell of life enclosed behind four walls, only allowed out if she cloaked herself in black cotton more oppressive than a nun's habit. He to the self-generating frenzy of a business world where he soon forgot an unexpected fling in Lebanon.

Until January 1978. At London airport on his way to Rome he picked up a newspaper. A story inside made him tremble with shock. Princess Misha had been stoned to death. Her lover's head had been hacked off in the main square of Jidda by one of Mohammed's elderly retainers.

Adultery, sanctified within Islamic marriage by the convenient device of allowing a man four wives, and embarked upon with enthusiasm by Saudi men in parts of the world to which they now have access, is punishable by death under the barbaric hypocrisy which passes for God's law in Saudi Arabia. (Some men still say '*karram Allah*', 'God forgive me', before even mentioning such a worthless subject as women in conversation, yet the Koran says heaven is at the feet of a mother.)

Of all the tensions being detonated by the money rush none will provide such an explosion as the emergence of women into real life. It is beginning, after thousands of years of inconsistency.

Even on flights within Saudi Arabia, young girls and women discard their veils with relief during take-off, and carefully cover themselves again before landing. On international flights beautifully groomed girls board in London, Paris or Beirut, flirt blatantly during the journey, and disembark in Riyadh wrapped in black, indistinguishable from other 'Guinness bottles', as they are known to foreigners. An adulterous wife has one advantage in Saudi Arabia: the garb she is forced to wear in public makes it impossible for her to be recognized. She can go from place to place in the knowledge that no one dares stop her, and no one can follow with certainty. Saudi Arabia is hell for private detectives. It is also hell for women who cannot accept archaic limitations.

'You must switch off as soon as you leave the plane,' says the English wife of a prominent Saudi. 'You have to. It is two separate worlds. And it affects not only women. My thirteen-



year-old son goes to Millfield. I take him to England a few days before the start of term. The first day he is there, he will not take off his shirt in front of other children. After a day or two, he wears a tee-shirt. But it takes a week before he will undress in front of his friends and feels happy to walk around in shorts.

'We have worked so hard here for fourteen years. We have spent so much money. But where have we gone wrong? Why does everyone try to leave so quickly and so often if Saudi Arabia is so wonderful? We are doing everything except developing a society and an environment which is pleasant to live in.'

Some are satisfied. Half the population cannot be kept subjugated without collusion on their part, however much it is based on fears of change or the weight of tradition. It is sometimes impossible for Westerners to appreciate when they visit a Saudi home that the women scuttling in the background may have more 'rights' than a lonely suburban housewife in the West. Saudi women retain their own name when married, keep their own money under all circumstances, and must be treated equally with other wives when divorced. If a husband divorces his wife and wishes later to remarry her, he faces restrictions which might surprise the most advanced sexual crusader in the West. The woman first has to marry another man and have intercourse with him. Occasionally the experience is more satisfactory than with her first husband so she stays with the second man.

Surprisingly, even a few Western women find life in Saudi Arabia tolerable, although they need to have somewhat limited social ambitions. In Dammam, on the east coast, I met Muriel Smith, whose husband, Don, earns £10000 a year working on the docks. They share a house with another English couple, and have few complaints. 'I miss a drop of whisky now and again,' says forty-five-year-old Muriel. 'But I reckon I go out here more than I did when we lived in Liverpool. We go to the airport every Thursday and Saturday. It's a beautiful airport. We spend a couple of hours watching the planes take off and land, and have a cup of coffee. It's ever so much fun.'

Even Zaki Yamani's twenty-six-year-old wife, Tammam, a former biology student in Beirut, does not seem too bored. Her

bookshelves are crammed with video cassettes and she can sit watching soap operas and detective films when her husband brings guests home.

No country overwhelmed by the money rush can afford to keep half the population unoccupied, cloistered and ineffective, fluttering through life in Givenchy creations whilst they rot their bodies with chocolates, their psyches with frustration, and their minds with videotaped American tat. Already the flickerings of emancipation are beginning, discreetly and illegally. Saudi law, devised in unintelligible legal language by Egyptians, forbids women and men to work together, but in Dhahran I met twenty-nine-year-old Naileh Mousli who is an oil engineer, a remarkable achievement for a Saudi girl who is one of twenty children. Her father had two wives, and she is the youngest of nine, in nine years, by his first. She works for ARAMCO and is married to a Lebanese who is also employed by the firm.

'My father is in real estate, and my mother is illiterate. But she is very broadminded, and pushed us really hard. She wished she could have been something and she knows how times are changing. I am very proud of her. When I started work I was criticized by some members of the family, mainly through ignorance. I had a very hard time trying to explain in simple terms what a petroleum engineer does. Some of the Saudis in the field don't like it. One told me he would not let his daughter be like me for anything. That doesn't make me feel humiliated because I realize their customs and I know what they think. I expect some people to be shocked because it is strange. A lot of people, even Americans, don't believe I am a Saudi.

'I find it tough at times because I am given all the opportunities to work here like a man, but when I talk to my aunts and other women I have to think backwards, go down to their level and talk about cooking, raising children, the things they care for.

'You cannot force change on people. You present it to them and make them aware. Then it is up to them. I am lucky because I have been to college and have the chance to know what I want. I don't like the way my mother was brought up and I don't like the way she is living now. I am going to change that for myself.

'But it is difficult for a man who might feel the same way. He



has a role imposed upon him and cannot just drop everything and tell his father and grandfather that he is not going to be a male chauvinist any more. If he did that, he would be isolated, excluded by his friends. That is why Saudi men who want to change the situation marry foreign women. They know that if they marry a Saudi woman, both his family and hers will impose tradition upon them. If he marries a foreigner, at least he will have peace from her side. If I married a Saudi and he did not want me to wear a veil, my father still has the influence to insist.

'Westerners criticize our society, but they have never tried to understand it. Maybe you are making more of an effort now because you need us. But you base everything on your own standards. Of course, we have not been able to update the customs of our country quickly enough to match the new circumstances. It is creating a lot of tension under the surface. Saudi men don't feel comfortable in the presence of Westerners. They are suspicious, unsettled, and wonder what is going to happen to their women, Well, that is the price they have to pay for Western technology.'

The price is too high for the *ulemas*, who fight fiercely to retain their authority. The president of girls' education, Shaikh Nassar bin Hamad al Rashid, blacklisted a twelve-year-old girl from Saudi schools for answering in a magazine questionnaire that she 'loved' a popular singer. Her family had to move to another city and change their identity.

In spite of his imposing title, Shaikh Nassar is not actually allowed to enter the schools for which he is responsible (he communicates with them by letter or telephone) because that could compromise the pupils, although it is difficult to accuse him of anything but the utmost propriety.

He is a tall, slightly stooped man. A full grey beard and habit of padding barefoot about his office give the image of an Old Testament prophet. As we talked one day his secretary, a small young man, watched intently, his dark brown eyes quivering whenever sex was mentioned, which was frequently, and he shifted nervously as if expecting the devil himself to walk through the door. The room was gloomy, full of heavy furniture, and there was an atmosphere of fervent piety as

Shaikh Nassar began to explain to me his version of female sexuality, and the advance of fundamentalist Islam.

'At first there was a resistance here to girls' education because people thought it would be harmful. But when they realized responsible men, the *ulemas*, would be in charge they changed their minds. The resistance to education came not from us, but from the people themselves.

'Why are girls segregated? Sharia Law – and Christian – does not agree that boys and girls should be together until they are married unless they are brother and sister. They need one hundred per cent concentration, and if they mix they will not concentrate. As regards Christianity, I am referring to the Old Testament, which does not allow sex without marriage nor the causes which might lead to it.

'But there are other reasons why girls are segregated. We want to pay attention to women, to be generous to them because they need more taking care of than boys. This is the only country in the world where women are given their rights. They don't honour women in Britain or America or the Soviet Union. We call it honouring a woman. What do you think?'

'I think it is patronizing, out of date, and is going to lead to trouble,' I replied, such heresy making the secretary jump like a startled rabbit. Shaikh Nassar was urbane, amused at such Western incomprehension.

'We give women freedom, but within the limits of their religion. If they want to break away from their religious boundaries, that is all right. Naturally, education is a two-sided weapon. It is good if it is used for the sake of welfare, but bad if used for any other reason.'

Many of the leading Saudis, like Shaikh Yamani, send their daughters to be educated abroad, particularly in the United States. Surely if anything was going to corrupt a nation's youth that would?

'You cannot judge a whole nation by a few people. Knowledge is a virtue and should be pursued everywhere except where there is vice,' he replied obliquely.

'Like in the United States?'

'Like in the United States. For the welfare of the whole world it is important that Saudi Arabia's morals should not decline,