

PROLOGUE

I - Palm Gardens

It's the middle of the day and along the white path leading to the palm gardens the air is vibrating in the heat. White heat ricochets off the rocks, off the mountainside and off the ochre walls of the mud-built washing chamber where women have long since finished the daily wash and the clothes, laid out to dry in the sun, have been folded and taken away. The water, as it flows from the washing chamber along the channel towards its next appointment downstream, is scalding hot from the unremitting heat of the sun. It is on its way to the palm gardens where the trees, drooping dustily in the heat, are thirsting for their turn in the regulated cycle, a timetable of hours, days and weeks, when they receive their own life-sustaining ration of water.

The heat and the air tremble and the stifling sawing of the cicadas is silent. Nothing moves until, almost invisible in a corner of deep shade, the Arif gets to his feet. He spits, adjusts his robe and his round cap, and squints first towards the sun and then to the stick which stands vertical, at the height of a goat, stuck in the ground next to the channel of water at the point where the white, beaten path forks. After examining the stick and, more particularly, the shadow that it casts, he glances at his watch and, apparently satisfied on both accounts, makes his way down the track that borders the water and leads to the palm gardens. In his walk he disturbs some small green frogs from the side of the runnel; they leap out of his way and into the water with a refreshing plop. He pays no attention. He is the Arif, in charge of the sharing of the water in the village's falaj system and he takes no notice of small frogs leaping out of his way.

The Arif continues his way along the main channel of the falaj and, at some fifty metres into the network of shade of the palm gardens, an observer would see him pause at a point where channels branch off into the gardens. He bends down and, with one hand, lifts a slate lying at the side of the branching channel. He holds it over the centre of the left-hand channel where the water is running, ready to lower it into the water. With his right hand he lifts another slate, which is holding the water back from the channel that runs at right angles. With a practised movement he lifts the one and drops the other into its appointed slot and now the water, prevented from flowing ahead, diverts to the left. It flows in a steady trickle, dampening the dusty soil of the dry channel and making its way to the craters around each palm tree where hands have mounded up the orange-coloured soil to capture a ration of water for each tree. This small task done the Arif makes his way back to the main falaj and to the next set of gardens. After three more of these operations his work is finished for the next two hours and he returns to his place in the shade, next to the time-keeping stick.

As he makes his way slowly, figures appear among the trees and the alfalfa that grows in their shade in the gardens where water is newly flowing. They guide the water to the trees; scrape a way for it in the dusty earth, heap up the protective mounds forming the bowls around each tree.

"Salaam aleikum!"

"Aleikum wa salaam!" They salute each other.

Greetings are exchanged and the figures watch the retreating back of the Arif whom they respect and trust although he carries no book of rules. He knows by heart the shares allotted to each garden and member of the village and, when changes take place – as happens when landowners fall on good or bad times and shares of water are bought or sold or mortgaged – the Arif writes them in the book, where each landowner has a page recording his portion of the shares in the village's water and where changes are noted.

These days there is pressure on the shares and their price is rising at the yearly auctions; inflationary pressures are at work and shareholdings are becoming consolidated. The reason is known to all: the water is not flowing as it used to do.

II - The World In An Ice Cube

Cruising low, at a height of 7,000 feet, the pilot of the Learjet blinked his eyes in disbelief at the sight below. It looked like a giant ice-cube towed behind an oil-tanker, but surely that couldn't be the case?

Dan Bradwell glanced at his co-pilot.

"Do you see what I think I see, Si?"

Simon shook his head signalling his equal disbelief.

"If that isn't the most..... So is that what they wanted us to fly low to get a look at? Are you going any lower?"

Normally on a flight from London to Dubai, and at this stage of the journey, they would be flying at 30,000 feet or more – too high to make out individual vessels on the sea below, but today his passengers, a Sheikh returning to Dubai with his guest, Alastair Singleton, the chief executive of a UK-based plc, had specifically required him to drop down to 7,000 feet and had given him the co-ordinates where this descent was to be made.

"Lower? What for?" Dan asked. "Do you really think if I go down a bit, we might see a polar bear on the top?" We just might! Remember those Polar Mints you used to get? The wrappers had an iceberg with a polar bear on the top!"

"D'you reckon it's a stunt they're pulling?"

"Can't be anything else. Must be planning to tow it to the Palm Island and moor up alongside".

It took a lot to surprise the two seasoned pilots and not even the sight of an iceberg hitched to an oil-tanker could draw from them more than a jocular form of speculation.

The door from the main cabin opened and their stewardess looked in.

"Hi guys! Can I interest you in lunch?"

She had brought them a tray with smoked trout sandwiches, which she placed on the flat surface between the two seats.

"What's the conversation back there, Kelly?"

"Couldn't really say Dan, except that they are both peering out the window and sounding excited. In fact they've asked for champagne so I'd best be getting along!"

"Hang on a sec: do you want to see what the excitement is about?" Simon asked.

She nodded.

"Take a look down there".

The pilot indicated to the stewardess where to look.

"Oh wow! That's extraordinary! Is that why they asked you to take us down so low?"

"That must be why. You'd better get along with the champagne –I imagine they have asked for it on ice! And, Kelly....!"

"Sir?"

"Tell His Excellency that I'll be taking the aircraft up again to 30,000, in five minutes time if that's fine by him."

"Will do!" and Kelly disappeared into the main cabin again.

A boardroom in Dubai is furnished and decorated on the lavish side. The table itself is of engraved crystal and the supports are fountains whose water is laced with powdered gold- leaf that catches the light and shimmers. Gold and white brocaded chairs and settees line the walls and rose water perfumes the air.

His Excellency, having recovered from the six-hour flight and feeling refreshed, welcomes his flight companion to a place at the table and makes the introductions. Looking around the table he addresses them in Arabic:

"*Salaam aleikum*" and turning to his guest from London, "*Ahlan wa sahlan!*"

"Welcome! Welcome to the head offices of Al Zuwaidi Enterprises. It is a pleasure and we wish you a happy stay and a good and fortunate outcome for both our enterprises!"

Alastair Singleton nodded and smiled his appreciation of the greeting and accepted the thimble-sized cup of coffee and the sweetmeats that were passed with ceremony by a servant in crisp white dishdash, his head-dress in the livery of the company he served.

And for the time-being that was all. The ceremonial would be lengthy. It was clear to the guest that nothing was to be hurried and propriety was to be observed. He sipped his coffee and ate the almond-encrusted pastries. The people he had come to meet, six or seven of them, did the same and exchanged small talk, mostly in Arabic.

Were they asking about each other's families? Or the state of the market? business news, from the Emirate and the other Gulf States? Having nothing of the language beyond the formalities of greeting, the guest could not tell.

Fifteen minutes passed, after which the servant cleared the coffee cups and sweetmeat plates from the table and the host, the chairman, sitting back in his upholstered chair, prepared to address the meeting in near-perfect English.

"Gentlemen: it is pleasure for me to present to you our guest Mr Alastair Singleton from Pure Spring Akwa of the United Kingdom"

Starting from Singleton's right he made the introductions around the table.

"Shaikh Abdul Karim al Zuwaidi; Director of al Zuwaidi Enterprises – Mr Alastair Singleton." Both parties greeted with nods and murmured politeness.

"His Excellency Said al Zubair al Thiwani; Minister of Commercial Affairs", more nods and greetings.

"His Excellency Shaikh Rashid al Bayid al Buraidi, Minister in charge of Water Resources and Distribution...."

The introductions continued until Alastair had mentally ticked off all the names on the list he had been memorising during the flight.

The meeting got down to business. Alastair Singleton had prepared meticulously. To say he was nervous would be an exaggeration. Nervousness was not in his make-up but he was not one to underestimate the risks involved in striking a deal and preferred not to leave anything to chance. Watching his audience closely for their reaction he outlined the services that his company could offer and the expertise and experience that made up their track record over the past twenty-five years.

"Our business is to carry out tests and to advise on the exploitability or otherwise of underground water supplies which might literally be the source of a new bottled water and mineral water extraction industry here in your country. We have a staff of geologists, chemists and economists who would be at your disposal to carry out feasibility studies. We can advise on matters including factory sites, construction, equipment and bottling and distribution systems. Should you commission us we would, as a matter of course, investigate the state of the market and existing competition."

As he spoke he let his eye move around the table making contact with individuals as he emphasised his various points of interest. They presented an array of expressions which, he admitted, he found difficult to read. He continued.

"It is well known that the market for bottled water is...er buoyant" any pun that might have been appreciated by an audience in London passed un-noticed. Alastair sighed inwardly: shame about that; he had thought some of them might get it.

"First, take the young," he continued. "Bottled water for young people is not just a matter of thirst, nor indeed merely an acknowledgement of a healthy life-style; it is a statement of fashion and of style. Indeed some young people seem to be unable to function without the comfort of regular sips of water, often flavoured with limes or orange flowers or other exotic additions. Here in the Gulf States you have an abundance of limes and other citrus fruits as well as spices; you need only take a stroll around your souks to savour the variety on offer to provide the flavours and the perfumes!"

The audience smiled.

"But young people are just part of the market and you know better than I do that bottled water, in packs of six or twelve, are a regular item on the family shopping list," although, he reflected, looking around at them, these men in the Gulf were not likely to do the weekly shop.

"Now, most of your bottled water is imported and the names on the shelves of the supermarkets here are ones that I recognise from the UK. Over there however a niche market is enjoyed by small

and local sources: sources like Kentish Hills and Chiltern Spring Water produce relatively small quantities and sell locally at a premium price and I envisage that here, in the Gulf States, this trend would find favour, especially among the huge number of visitors who search for authenticity, for locally produced goods, and a change from the global brands which they can get everywhere.”

“Extraction costs would be high and the premium would have to reflect that” the Minister for Commercial Affairs commented.

“Intelligent marketing will be required to justify the extra margin; as I hinted before, subtle flavourings – the range of spices and fruits which have never been used in this way – the presentation, a variety of value-adding marketing devices will make the brand attractive.”

“This is for the marketing department to put forward. At the moment we will commission the study and make a decision. The important question is sustainability – sustainability of supply. The geologists will need to work with our university departments which have mapped the aquifers”

“I believe that your policy is to reserve ground supplies for government approved projects?” Singleton queried.

“That is so. Much of the water used in our cities comes from desalination. And, naturally, grey water is used for the amenities, the greening of our environment.”

“So the water we plan to use will come from the deep reserves?”

“That is so. Exploitation for this project will in fact involve drawing supplies from extremely deep aquifers”

“I might add,” the minister continued, “that the aquifers are not respectful of national boundaries: it is something that can cause friction with our neighbours, but that is our concern and not anything that you need to take into account. Spring water, please remember this, is becoming a scarcity and a luxury.”

“And there, precisely, lies our marketing opportunity” Singleton responded elegantly.

The meeting broke up with agreement reached that the studies would go ahead with a view to production starting in eight months from the day. It would be a challenging target and Alistair Singleton needed to get to his hotel to set the action in motion. His host escorted him down to the foyer where a car drew up and His Excellency’s personal assistant stood ready to escort him to his hotel.

“It has been several years since you last visited, Mr Alistair, and before returning to your hotel you must see the development that has taken place and in particular the islands we are so proud of. Zaid will be your guide.”

“Thank you! I was hoping for this opportunity”.

The car drove them to the creek where a private launch was waiting. Ten minutes was all the time it took to wend a way down to the mouth of the creek and another ten minutes at full throttle with the launch’s bow battering against the incoming waves out into the bay.

“Our destination is New Zealand” Zaid shouted, against the buzz of the engine and the slapping of the waves. “Please, take some food.”

It was two in the afternoon and the fish pastries were welcome.

The driver throttled back and the bow of the launch settled in the water. They put-putted towards a jetty protected by a sea-wall but still under construction, surmounted by cranes and grabs where they had to shout over a cacophony of pile-drivers and heavy-lifting machines

From the marina where they tied up Zaid proposed a tour of the island, which Alistair was keen to see. Construction ashore seemed to be almost complete: new-built villas stood in newly planted gardens where work was still going on. As they walked around Alistair could see that gardens were still being put in place: *instant gardens* he thought – *the way they do it at Chelsea* - and watched as a fully-grown palm tree was hoisted into a hole in the sand with crates of Irish peat moss lined up to bed in around it. He could see the irrigation system, black hose piping encircling the area, with drip-feeders spaced at two or three foot intervals.

Zaid was leading and as they walked he indicated a villa and garden where the trees and plants seemed well established.

“This garden is the leader” he explained. “Your garden expert...” it was a name that Alistair recognised, “She designs this one for us four years ago. Two years ago she come and supervise. Trees are planted, flowers for patios, small bushes, water bowls for fishes, nice fountain and lights for night time to make beautiful this garden.”

It was delightful and Alistair took time to wander around, deep in thought but mindful to record the scene with photographs.

“This is beautiful. But I have work to do and a plane to catch and I know His Excellency won’t want me to cause a delay. A quick look inside one of the completed villas – then back to base please, Zaid. And thank you for the tour. I’ve enjoyed it a lot.”

As the launch transported them, flat out, back across the bay, Alistair had a final question for his guide.

“Do you have any islands near to the Antarctic?”

His guide looked puzzled. Alastair tried to clarify.

“The Antarctic, where they have icebergs and penguins!”

The guide shook his head.

“Maybe here. New Zealand I think have snow and ice...”

“Mmm. Not icebergs though” Alistair muttered to himself.

An hour later the small plane had taken off. It circled over the bay giving a fine view of the islands that Alastair had visited. Three palm trees like emerald jewels in gold settings were laid out below him in a sapphire surround that glinted with the white crests of waves. And coming up ahead of them now, the outline of The World, which he had recently visited. New Zealand was below them – he could almost make out the gardens he had seen and Africa next with the Americas coming up ahead. As the islands receded and the sky began to darken, the plane gained height and Alastair caught site of a tug-boat. He had seen it before with its tow-load, that giant cube, refracting now the last rays of the sun.

Alistair declined the champagne and sat back with a whisky and his thoughts. The meeting had gone well – as well as he had hoped. And if the project could be signed and sealed and work start eight months from today he would be well satisfied. He would also feel that he had made his mark at Akwa UK in the short time since he had been invited onto the board. He stretched his full six foot two out on the reclining chair, shrugged off his jacket and, running his hand through his only-slightly greying, rich brown hair, allowed his mind to dwell on the Palm Island villa. It seemed to offer the ideal set-down pad between time zones which he urgently needed as his other concerns gathered speed and he felt sure that, with a little persuasion Jessica would take to it with enthusiasm.

The sun sank into a horizon of orange and indigo cloud. Alastair was ready to shut down for the night and the bedroom cabin looked inviting. Six hours of sleep would be good.

“Wake me at 5 am - UK time” he told the attendant.

He would need time before they landed to prepare his address to the company’s board, not to mention to work out how he would put his plans to Jessica in the evening.

