Lord of Arabia
A Biography of Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud
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IBN SAUD

An Intimate Study of a King

By H. C. ARMSTRONG

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

TURKEY IN TRAVAIL
TURKEY AND SYRIA RE-BORN
GREY WOLF — MUSTAFA KEMAL

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I desire to express my thanks to
HIS MAJESTY KING ABDUL AZIZ
for his hospitality and many kindnesses
on my last visit to Arabia
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for placing much material in my hands and treating me with unfailing kindness.

H. C. A.
AUTHOR'S NOTE

TO DESCRIBE, so that he may live before the reader, a Moslem and an Arab of outstanding personality, in terms that come within the everyday consciousness of Christians and Europeans has not been easy.

The Europeans and the Arabs have much on which they do not agree. They differ in experience, outlook, and manner of expression. Often their standards of right and wrong are not the same. Thus the desert Arabs are aghast at the unpunished adultery and fornication of the Europeans, while the Europeans are shocked at the legal polygamy of the desert Arabs. Polygamy is punished by imprisonment in Europe. Adultery is punished by death by stoning in Arabia.

I have, therefore, boldly translated both ideas and phrases, so that the reader shall grasp the correct meaning easily, rather than that his mind should boggle with uncertainty over meticulous details set down in unaccustomed language.

Arabic is full of complicated sounds which cannot be produced correctly with Roman characters. It has twenty-eight letters which can be made into intricate combinations and which change in shape as they combine.

For the spelling of Arabic words I have kept one rule that, while keeping as close to the sound as possible, the written word shall not torment the English reading eye. Thus Saud may be written Saoud, Sa'ud, Sa'oud, Seoud,
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Se’aoud, Si’oud, Esseoud, and in a dozen more ways. I have kept it as Saud.

Again an Arab delights in complicating names. Given any name he will quote a whole genealogical table for it. Thus he will describe Ibn Saud as Abdul Aziz ibn(son of) Abdur Rahman al-Feisal al (of the family of) Saud. He will add more generations if he is in the mood. To increase the complications he may call Ibn Saud, Abu Turki, the Father of Turki, Ibn Saud’s first born son.

In this book I have for each personality chosen one name and retained it throughout.

On the life of Ibn Saud there is little documentary evidence, such as books and articles and records. The two principal authorities are Mr. St. John Philby, an English Moslem, who was at one time in the Indian Civil Service, and is now living in Arabia for English and American firms, and Mr. Ameen Rihani, an Arab Christian from Syria of American nationality.

The major portion of the evidence collected has been from word of mouth. The books of Mr. St. John Philby and Mr. Ameen Rihani I have used freely. They are full of valuable material. I have, however, used them only after careful corroboration, whenever possible, with persons present at the events described.

INTRODUCTION

Far back in Time, when Europe lay shrivelled and cold under the glaciers of the Age of Ice, Arabia was a land of forests and pastures, and watered by three great rivers.

Then as the earth spun over on its axis and its crust heaved, rising here and falling there, the seasons and the climates changed; and, as the ice melted, Europe woke to life.

But Arabia became a desert, for the rain came no more; the rivers dried up; the forests withered away; over the pastures swept shifting sand.

For many centuries it remained so. On its frontiers civilizations grew to maturity and decayed; countries became rich; great empires rose and fell. To the east along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rose Babylon and Nineveh; and beyond them Persia; to the west, Egypt and the Pharaohs with all their pomp and majesty; to the north, by the shores of the Mediterranean, Phoenicia and the Roman Empire.

But Arabia remained isolated and, except for rare traveller’s tales, unknown. The merchants who came trading across the ocean from the Indies and Africa up the Red Sea, bringing jewels and ivory, spices and myrrh and frankincense to the trading-posts which the Jews had made at Mecca and Medina, told tales of great cities hidden behind the desert; but they were only travellers’ tales. In the century before Christ the Emperor Augustus sent his
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Governor of Egypt to invade Arabia and find these cities. The Governor found only a barren land inhabited by wild tribes; and many of his men died of thirst in the great wastes.

Arabia remained isolated and unknown, for it was a brutal country and inhospitable, a land of cruelty and violence.

Where there was a little water, round wells, in an oasis, and on the sea-shores some built villages of mud huts, and with their primitive irrigation fought for existence against the sand that for ever came thrusting in on them persistent and relentless. The rest were shepherds, bedouin, who wandered throughout the seasons driving their flocks across the vast steppes in search of grazing.

Both villagers and bedouin lived hard and dangerously. They were pagans and savages, unclean, poverty-stricken, debased in their habits, idolaters with crude and brutal beliefs. They were proud men, fiercely independent and prepared to sacrifice themselves for their freedom. Untamed and untamable, they were split up into small tribes, which were continuously at war with each other and were savagely intolerant of any stranger or of any innovation.

Suddenly out of this monstrous chaos was born a Great Man, preaching a Great Religion—the Prophet Mohamed preaching Islam.

Islam united the Arabs, purified them, bound them into one people. Mohamed filled them with a great Faith. His power increased rapidly. Within ten years he controlled all Arabia. His successors and followers advanced across the Euphrates into Persia and beyond. Northwards they went through Syria into Asia Minor and stormed at the walls of Constantinople. Westwards they swept along the African coast across the Sahara to the Atlantic and up into Spain and threatened France. Within a hundred years they had expanded their rule until the Arab Empire stretched from the Straits of Gibraltar to the Indus River and from Central Africa to the Persian frontier.

Islam itself went farther: to Constantinople and from there with the victorious Turks across the Balkans to the gates of Vienna to threaten all Christendom; across the Black Sea to the Crimea and Russia; and by Persia across Central Asia to the Great Wall of China.

But as the Arab Empire expanded and Islam became the Faith of many people, Arabia itself ceased to be the centre. The centre moved to Damascus, and then to Baghdad and Cairo. Out of the Desert had come the faith and the driving force, but Arabia, having given birth to these, sank back into its old state. Once more it became a land of ignorance and violence, shut off from the outside world.

Many more centuries passed. The Middle Ages, the Crusades, the Empire of Byzantium came and went. Tamerlaine the Tartar and Jengis Khan swept by, destroying. The Turks came conquering, seized and held all the gates to the East, and then in turn began to lose their grip and fail.

In all these events Arabia took no part. Shut away behind the barriers of the Desert, its people lived their own lives, strove with the sand for their bare existence, raided, murdered and fought each other in their eternal tribal wars and their blood-feuds. The Turks claimed suzerainty over them, but it was without reality.
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So a thousand years passed, and then once more, late in the eighteenth century, came a man with the fire of religion in him to weld the Arabs into one people and to inflame them into action. There came Mohamed ibn Abdul Wahab preaching a revival of Islam.

Ibn Abdul Wahab was a fanatic. He ripped away the heresies and abuses which had grown up round Islam and he preached the Faith in its original simplicity. He called on the Arabs to purify themselves, to forswear all pleasure and luxury, and with rigid asceticism to serve God, the One True God.

For a while he was persecuted, until he took refuge in the Principality of Nejd and claimed the protection of one Mohamed ibn Saud, who ruled in the towns of Diriyah and Riad.

The centre of Arabia is a plateau shut in on three sides by desert and on the fourth by steppes where the bedouin graze their flocks. This plateau is the Principality of Nejd.

Over this plateau are scattered many villages and oases. The people of Nejd, the Nejdis, who live in them, are hard-working and stalid. Through the centre of the plateau runs a long valley rich in water and filled with palm-groves and gardens. In this valley stands the town of Riad.

Riad is the core of Nejd, and Nejd is the core and the very heart of Arabia. Who rules in Nejd may rule all Arabia.

Saud, the Amir of Diriyah and Riad, was ambitious. He recognized the value of the Abdul Wahab. He made an agreement with him: together by preaching and the sword they would bring the Arabs back to the true Faith of Islam.

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Their success was immediate. Saud was a leader and a soldier; Abdul Wahab was a preacher whose preaching caught the imagination of the desert Arabs. First they cleansed Diriyah and Riad and then Nejd: they destroyed the idols and tombs of the saints; they enforced the orders of the Koran to the letter, the five daily prayers and the keeping of the Fast; they forbade smoking, drinking wine, and, as a dramatic warning, they stoned to death in the open market a woman guilty of adultery.

Tribe after tribe submitted to them and was filled with a savage fanaticism. Their enemies nicknamed them Wahabis. Led by Saud, known as the Great, they swept out beyond Nejd conquering and converting by the sword. Within sixty years they had established their rule across all Arabia, from the Persian Gulf to the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina and from the Indian Ocean to the Lebanon mountains of Syria. They were masters of the desert, and they refused to acknowledge the suzerainty of the Caliph and Sultan of Stamboul and his Turks. They raided into Mesopotamia and destroyed the sacred city of Kerbela. With the hunger of desert-men for the wealth of the fertile lands beyond, and as their ancestors had done before them, they pressed on northwards to attack Syria and the shores of the Mediterranean, and so to burst out into the world beyond, attacked Alep and made it pay tribute, and looted the outskirts of Damascus, and raided down to Basra.

The Turks woke to the danger, and ordered Mohamed Ali, their Viceroy in Egypt, to march into Arabia.

Mohamed Ali defeated the Wahabis, invaded Nejd, captured the Wahabi capital and sent the Wahabi ruler in
chains to Constantinople. There before the Mosque of Santa Sophia where the Great Square runs down to the foot of the Bosphorus, the Turks beheaded him with much ceremony.

Then, weary of the harsh land, the Turks and Egyptians established a few garrisons and went gladly home, leaving the Arabs to themselves.

Like sand before the wind the Wahabi Empire of Saud the Great was gone. Nejd lay broken. With no strong man to unite and lead them, the Arabs split once more into quarrelling tribes. All Arabia was ripped into pieces by wars, raids, tribe raiding tribe while their sheiks plotted and intrigued, murdered their kinsfolk and rivals and were in turn murdered. Throughout the nineteenth century Arabia was again a land of bloodshed and strife, a land of brutality and violence where no man's life was safe and to which few travellers came.

Thus it was when, in 1880, on a November morning, at the time when the muezzins were calling to the dawn-prayer, there was born, in the palace at Riad, to Abdur Rahman, one of the descendants of Saud the Great and to Sarah his wife, a son whom they named Abdul Aziz, but who was known, after his great ancestor, as Ibn Saud.

PART I

CHAPTER I

Ibn Saud was brought up in a wing of the palace. He was suckled by his mother, who was the daughter of one Ahmed Sudairi, a headman of the Dawasir tribe from the south, a big-built woman of a stock from which big men had come. Like all Arab women of good family she had been veiled since the age of seven and shut away indoors with the other women behind latticed windows and locked doors in the palace harem. She rarely went out, and then only heavily veiled, with a negro slave as escort, and to visit other women. Like other Arab women also, she had never been taught to read or write, and except for women's gossip she was ignorant of what went on in the outside world, so that she could neither be a companion nor take any part in the active lives of her men, but she had a shrewd judgment of values. She was devout, and with an innate common sense that made her wise in advice, so that at home she had much influence with her husband and her children.

The palace was an immense, sprawling building of halls and chambers and dark twisting corridors, built round a central courtyard and inside a high wall, but it had no plan, for it had grown haphazardly. As more rooms were required, new houses had been built, connected into the rest by passages and overhead bridges, and the outer wall extended to take them in, until the palace filled all the centre of the town.

As soon as he was weaned, Ibn Saud was taken from the women's quarters and handed over to a negro slave who