PART VIII
CHAPTER XL

IBN SAUD, now in 1917, was thirty-seven years of age and in his prime. A great giant with a handsome head set finely on broad shoulders. He had the easy magnificence of manner of one who has been used to being obeyed and who has long held the powers of life and death over all those round him. His eyes were brown and full of light. Though they often concealed his thoughts they showed his moods—shrewd and wise when summing up a man or considering a problem, cordial and smiling when he was pleased; and stern and ferocious when he was angry. His forehead was high and broad. His features were clear cut and his nose beaked so that, while full-face he gave a sense of repose, side face he had the look of a hawk or an eagle, nervous with energy and on the watch to strike. He wore his moustaches trimmed close and his beard square and short.

The movements of the ordinary Arab are staccato and jerky, but, though even when seated he was rarely still, all Ibn Saud’s movements were deliberate and gave a sense of strength and poise. As he talked he often ran the beads of a prayer-chain between the thumb and first finger of his left hand. He walked with long rapid strides. Though over heavy and big for the Arab horses, he sat a horse well and had a great reputation as a swordsman.

Whether at home in the palace in Riad or travelling among the tribes he lived as frugally as if he was campaign

LORD OF ARABIA

ing. He cared nothing for comfort. His bed in the palace was a cheap iron affair. His clothes were simple; he used no silk; his only finery was a little embroidery on his cloak and gold wire in his head-ropes. He was, like many who do not smoke tobacco and who live clean, very sensitive to smells. Unpleasant smells, sweat of bodies, of offal or filth, distressed him. To counteract these he often used scent, especially essence of roses.

Once there came before him a well-known pasha to discuss important affairs of state. The day was hot. The pasha had been eating garlic and onions and he had been smoking—though not before Ibn Saud, for smoking was forbidden to all the King’s subjects. For a time Ibn Saud bore with him, but after a time he grew restless with irritation. At last he called to his slaves to bring the incense bowls and perfume the room. After the pasha was gone he burst out angrily:

“Pasha!” he said sprinkling himself liberally with scent, “he was no pasha but a scavenger”.

His food was, at most, in the morning some small sweet cakes with curdled milk and in the evening a plate of rice and meat with bread and a handful of dates. Except for coffee and tea which he drank at all times of the day and night, his only drink was water. Even if the weather was cold, as it often was on a winter’s night on the plateau, he had no fires in his rooms and no brazier in his tent.

He was always alert, watchful, and working, and he slept very little—three or four hours a day at the most—not because he was a bad sleeper, but because he had trained himself to this allowance by stern discipline, so that he might have more time to work. He grudged each hour to sleep as precious time thrown into the waste of unconsciousness, for he had much to do and so short a time in
which to do it. “Sleep”, he said, paraphrasing Shakespeare
unconsciously in Arabic, “was twin brother to death”.

He also worked with great speed and complete con¬
centration, and he had a prodigious memory. He would dic¬
tate rapidly to two secretaries at once on two different
subjects, interleaving his sentences, turning now to one
and now to the other, and while he was waiting for them
to catch him up deal in the broken periods with a judicial
case or discuss some matter of business with a minister;
and keep all clear and separate in his head. An interrup¬
tion did not muddle him; he would deal with it and then
without a question return to what he had been doing before
at the point he had left off as if the interruption had never
occurred. His brain was never at rest. Even when he was
at prayer he was chewing over facts, digesting them and
preparing some decision.

In Riad he lived with a certain magnificence. He began
to rebuild much of the palace, extending it so that it soon
filled a third of the town and he constructed round it a fine
wall with towers at the corners and over the gateways.
The audience chamber was a vast room capable of holding
three thousand people, with cushions round the walls, the
floor covered with carpets and the roof held up by rows of
white pillars. In it lived many servants and a large body¬
guard. Some of these were enormous negro slaves, the rest
were men of Nejd specially chosen. They were dressed in
white robes, and sometimes over these they were gold¬
embroidered cloaks, and they carried revolvers and long
carved silver-handled swords, and the palace was full of
their comings and goings on the errands of the Saud.

In the courtyard there were always large crowds spraw¬
ing on the ground or squatting on the benches along the
walls, for under the palace were huge kitchens from which

Ibn Saud fed a thousand people free each day with great
platters piled high with steaming rice and mutton, slabs
of flat bread, and with bowls of curdled milk.

Under the palace also were store-rooms from which he
gave clothes to the needy and presents to his guests. Frugal
in his own needs he was lavish in entertaining others and
generous to folly. When one of his ministers protested he
replied: “Neither I nor my ancestors have ever kept a
chest in which to hoard money. Hoarded money does no
good. Were the millions of Sultan Abdul Hamid of use to
him?”; and again to another, “We reap where we sow.
If I sow well in peace and prosperity I shall reap the fruit
in war and adversity. In peace I give all, even this cloak”
—touching the one he wore—“to any who may need it.
In war I ask and my people give all they have to me”.

He had an immense pride in his family, and he was
conscientious in all his family duties. He had married the
widow of his brother Sad and adopted his children as a
duty. Each day he visited all his family, his children, his
sister Nura—his mother had died some years before—his
wives in the harem, and sat awhile with his father Abdur
Rahman and asked his advice on anything of special im¬
portance.

Sometimes if he had finished the day’s business early he
would, in the cool of the evening, ride out on horseback
with his guards, his children and his slaves round him, for
a picnic among the gardens and palm-groves outside the
town walls. Once free of the town and its puritan atmos¬
phere he would behave like an overgrown schoolboy, romp
with his children, play pratical jokes on those round him
and roar with laughter if they succeeded, and he was not
resentful if they retaliated. He might start a song, arrange
a mock fight with much galloping and shouting and chal¬
LORD OF ARABIA

LORD OF ARABIA

to his house. When Shalub arrived he found waiting for
him as a present from Ibn Saud a white-skinned and ex-
quisitely desirable Georgian slave-girl, who was beautiful
but, for he was past his prime, made his life a burden.

Frequently, however, these outbursts of anger were
carefully calculated to an end. Fahad, the son of Jiluwi,
was an undisciplined, troublesome, and quarrelsome young
blade. One day he struck one of the royal guard. Ibn Saud
sent for Fahad. He was sitting in his tent with his secre-
taries, some of his guards, and Philby the English dele-
gate. As Fahad entered the tent, Ibn Saud was up on to
him with one bound and a great bellow, and beating him
over the head with his riding-cane, he drove him round the
tent in front of him, lashing at him, then hurled him out
through the doorway. A minute later he sat down beside
Philby. He was quiet and cool. He dismissed the incident
with a shrug of his shoulders. Fahad and the young bloods
should all know that he would not allow any member of
the royal bodyguard to be touched by them.

Ibn Saud’s private chaplain, one of the ulema, had,
from personal spite, been making trouble among the
Ikhwani. Ibn Saud sent for him. The chaplain answered
without respect. Ibn Saud drove him headlong out of the
room and shouted to his guards to lock him in the common
jail, where he kept him for a week in solitary confinement.
Just then both the ulema and the chaplain needed a lesson.

When he was depressed this was rarely due to outside
facts. Good news certainly elated him, but bad news only
braced him to new effort, and to grapple with dangers and
difficulties did not depress but roused all his fighting
instinct.

His depression came from within himself. He was

116

117
strong and lusty. He had only once been ill when as a boy after the flight from Riad he had rheumatic fever, but he was naturally inclined to be sluggish of liver and he gave himself no chance. He ate his meals irregularly and at top speed and then gulped down glasses of water and hurried off to his work or to some strenuous exercise. He drove himself hard with little sleep, much work, and constant effort. He never rested to recuperate. He was never careful what he ate and drank, and when he halted on the march he drank from the first well and after fasting strictly all through the day in Ramadan he would in the evening swallow quantities of fresh fruit. When he was out of sorts he overdosed himself with emetics, pills, and concoctions of the doctors, and his whole system rebelled at the treatment and his temper and his spirits suffered.

But, always, whether he was elated or depressed, laughing or angry, there was a part of him somewhere at the back in his make-up, something which cool, calculating, and cautious like a still, small voice steadied him in any decision of importance and held back from sudden action until, with the labour of thought, he had reached a sound judgment.

CHAPTER XLI

Like most great men of action, Ibn Saud delighted in talk and discussion. Talk crystallized his thoughts out of vague, nebulous uncertainties which skirted just beyond the reach of the mind, into facts and hard decisions. Talk brought him into direct contact with other minds, and he enjoyed competing with men in words as well as in deeds.

In his affairs the spoken word was more important than the written, for he dealt with problems directly with the men who presented them and not through documents, and he judged cases facing accused and accuser and without reference to old memoranda, papers or legal tomes. News, reports, petitions all came to him by word of mouth, and the spoken word, the tone of the voice, the manner and personality of the speaker were the deciding factors.

After a day's work, talk and discussions were his relaxations, for the ordinary relaxations of music, dancing girls, drinking, and cards were all forbidden: they were accursed. It was his habit after the evening prayer to hold a general council, and after that for a while he visited his harem and then he would call his friends and guests to his private apartments. There he would talk of all manners of things, people, horses, camels, falcons, hunting, war, his past fights, religious problems. Above all he enjoyed calling any foreigners who might be in Riad and hearing of the doings of the outside world and of international politics.

On such occasions he would sit on a high divan with his legs and bare feet curled under him, his robe drawn round him and his head-ropes laid aside. As he talked he would pause for a minute with his hands on his knees, looking ahead of him, his chin and short, stiff, black beard thrust forward, thinking out and choosing his words. He would speak in a clear tenor voice that was mellow and soft in ordinary talk, but when he was excited or angry rose and rang out like a trumpet—in sonorous phrases and with expressive gestures. His hands were enormous, each one as big as two of any ordinary man, with long tapering fingers and very expressive in gesture. With a shiver of one hand he would show how a dying man fought for his last breath or with a roll of his wrists how a column of camels moved and swayed on the march through sand-dunes.
Sometimes for half an hour he would talk without a break, now working himself up into a passion, now lowering his voice with earnestness, using his hands, his shoulders, his whole body in eloquent gestures.

Though he needed little or no sleep, yet as the hours crept by often his guests grew drowsy and sleep bore down their eyelids with its weight. Ibn Saud would watch until perhaps one would tuck up a leg beneath him, spread his hand open before his face to hide himself and doze off, when he would explode a question at him. “So! Ahmed, is it not so? Tell us the facts!” and the sleeper bemused would wake with a start, keep his seat with difficulty and pretend that he had not slept. At which Ibn Saud would chuckle with delight and bait the sleeper.

Such jokes amused him. It happened that one day there came to see him a bedouin sheik named Nafi ibn Fadiliya, who was well-known for his greed and his shamelessness. Nafi moaned that while he was poor, Ibn Saud was wallowing in riches and comfort, and suggested that Ibn Saud, to level up some of the difference between them, should give him one of his slave girls.

“Go”, said Ibn Saud, “to the harem and choose a girl who will please you”, but he kept the sheik talking while he sent word to the women how to receive him.

When the sheik climbed the stairs to the harem, panting with excitement to make his choice, the slave-women met him at the top and with kicks and cuffs and blows chased him down to the bottom where Ibn Saud and a great crowd waited for him, splitting their sides with laughter to see him, a man, a sheik, a fighting man, running for safety from a pack of women.

Sometimes in the morning Ibn Saud would call his friends, his ministers and guests to the palace, and talk with them the whole night through, sitting on the open roof under the wide sky, the immense purple sky of Arabia, purple with the intensity of infinite depth, while the great stars wheeled up steadily across the vault, the Pole Star and the Southern Cross facing each other with the Milky Way arching above them, and Orion swaggering out his sword from his belt.

Then he would put his work aside and enjoy the full relish of talk. He would tell tales of war and adventure, ribald stories sometimes frankly bawdy; or if he was in the mood he would start some discussion on a religious problem, or he would talk of the primitive things of life, of the realities of the Divine and of Death. If there was any guest from abroad he would cross-examine him mercilessly for the news of the outside world.

Tireless he would talk and discuss through the night hours, though often those with him drooped with weariness until in the East would show the False Dawn, a pale saffron blush which came and went suddenly along the horizon, and then the night became even more black close to the ground in the shadow of the Earth; and from under that shadow would stir a little wind, soft, hardly heard but rather sensed, not a wind but a sigh as though the Earth was turning in her sleep and stretching as she woke, a wind that came out of the vast deserts of Inner Arabia, out of the country that the King ruled, a wind soft and spiced with the scent of the night dew on the sand, and on the camel-thorn and the palms.

It was the sign that the night was over and the King would clap his hands for his black slaves to bring coffee and tea, and more tea and bowls of laban, curdled camel’s milk, and after he had made his guests eat he would con-
duct them with majestic ceremony to the head of the
staircase and send his slaves to see them safely home, for
in the palace or in the streets there would be many wild
fanatical-eyed Wahabis who did not love strangers.

And while his guests crept wearily to bed he would,
fresh and vigorous as if he had slept, while the air was still
cool in the dawn, climb again to the roof of the palace and,
as the city woke below him with the wild clamour of the
shopmen shouting their wares, and the roar of the camels
and the dust of the caravans in the gate-ways, he would
pray looking towards Mecca.

After that he would rouse his household and his secre-
taries and go to his rooms to work until midday.

CHAPTER XLII

By the spring of 1918 Ibn Saud had a firm hold on
Nejd, but his relations with his neighbours had become so
complicated that it needed all his skill and self-control to steer
a good course. The Rashid was quiet for the time being.
He was doing a fine trade with the Turks, and he had a
working arrangement with Salim, who was now sheik of
Kuwait. Salim, twisted and black-hearted as ever, was
playing a crooked game. Allied with the English and under
their protection he was landing goods of all sorts and
transporting them by caravan through the Rashid to the
Turks in Damascus.

Salim was to Ibn Saud like a blister on a sore lip, for he
had not forgiven him his treachery over the Ajman, and
he swore that, when the chance came, he would plant his flag
inside Kuwait town. Now he cut across his contraband
trade and held up his convoys, and Salim retaliated by

encouraging the Ajman to raid into Nejd and by imprison-
ing Ibn Saud’s men if they came into Kuwait.

With Husein Ibn Saud’s quarrel had become very bitter,
for as the Turks were driven back by the English, Husein
grew more and more high-handed, and he strutted about,
blown out with fantastic megalomania.

Eventually he proclaimed himself “King of the Arab
Countries”, and wrote demanding that Ibn Saud should
recognize his new title and forthwith give up his claims to
the tribes of the Ataiba.

The wording of the letter was offensive, and when Ibn
Saud read it he flew into a passion and cursed Husein, but
he held his hand. The time was not yet come for action.
He realized, however, that soon he must fight Husein and
he prepared. He sent out his preachers, the fanatical Wahabi
mutawas, among the Ataiba to convert them to be Wahabis
and to set them against Husein.

The preachers had much success. Many of the Ataiba
listened to them. The people of the town of Khurma under
their headman Luwai, who had quarrelled with Husein,
became Wahabis, threw out Husein’s representative, re-
fused his taxes, and placed themselves under the protection
of Ibn Saud.

Now Khurma was an important town. It stood in a rich
oasis, surrounded by palm and tamarisk-groves and fields
of corn and lucerne, and it was a trading centre where the
bedouin of Nejd came to exchange their sheep and wool
with the merchants from the Hejaz. Above all it was the
key to the Hejaz, for it controlled the roads into the heart
of Husein’s country, to his port at Jedda, to his summer
residence in Taif, and to his capital in the sacred city of
Mecca.
Husein could not allow Khurma to remain in the hands of his enemy, so he sent eight hundred men to retake it, but the townspeople were stout-hearted. The majority of them were negro freedmen. Calling on the neighbouring bedouin to help them, they beat off Husein’s men, chased them through the palm-groves, across the dried-up river bed that lay to the west of the town, and out into the plains beyond.

Throughout Nejd went up a growl of anger. The Wahabis and Ikhwan demanded to be led out to defend Khurma against Husein. “It is the Sheriff Husein who is our enemy”, they said. “He is a heretic. It is a scandal that such a one should be Guardian of the Sacred Cities. He is a traitor and a usurper. It is shameful that he should attack True Believers and Wahabis and go unpunished. Up, O Abdul Aziz, and lead us at him”.

“Yea”, replied Ibn Saud. “It is true. Husein and the people of Mecca are mushrekin, heretics. They are an abomination that stinks in my nostrils, but for reasons of State I must wait awhile”.

CHAPTER XLIII

In reality Ibn Saud was in a cleft stick. All his instincts, his desires, his pride, and his people urged him to attack Husein, but always at his elbow was the English mission with Philby demanding that he remain loyal to the treaty he had made with England. Husein was the ally of England, they said, it would be a breach of the treaty to attack him. They urged him instead to attack the Rashid, the ally of the Turks and the common enemy. Belhaven talked of Damascus, suggested that he should strike there, but Ibn Saud knew his limitations. He would not over-reach himself with vain ideas, and he put the suggestion behind him.

But all that summer Ibn Saud was pulled this way and that, unable to decide which road to take. He was in a fever to attack Husein, but if he did, he would have to quarrel with the English, for it would help the Turks, and he did not wish to quarrel with the English. He was convinced that they would win the war, and all his spies reported that the Turkish armies were about to break. Half-starved, crippled with disease, short of arms, and without organization or spirit the Turks were deserting so that there were more deserters in the hills than soldiers in the ranks. Whereas the English were bringing up fresh troops, guns, armoured cars, and aeroplanes and massing to attack.

“Verily”, he said with a sigh, “verily if it were not that an open breach with Husein would be against the English and would help the Turks there is none I would sooner attack than Husein, for I hate him, and as for Abdullah, his son, he is a poisonous fellow”.

As he hesitated things grew worse. Husein sent another force against Khurma. Again they were driven off. Again Luwai of Khurma called to Ibn Saud for help and Ibn Saud sent him none.

Instead he wrote a letter of protest to Husein, who returned his letter unopened with an insulting message given in public verbally to the messenger, to tell Ibn Saud that he, King Husein, would march on Riad and wipe out Ibn Saud and his heretical Wahabis.

The people even of Riad and Nejd began to murmur against Ibn Saud. The Ikhwan joined in. The muttering
grew from a growl of indignation into a roar. His father, his advisers, the ulama, the sheiks led by Dawish of the Mutair and his Ikhwans all demanded that he attacked; but the English mission was still at his elbow holding him back. And to increase his difficulties, he could not understand the English and their policy. They were allied with him and yet they protected Salim of Kuwait who sent the Ajman raiding against him. They urged him to attack the Rashid, and yet let Salim send arms to the Rashid to use against him. They held him back from attacking Husein and gave Husein money and arms and with these Husein sent men to fight him.

And Philby could not, in loyalty to his own people, explain how in the rush and turmoil of war the various departments of the English Government, the India Office, the War Office, the Foreign Office, the Arab Bureau in Egypt—all parts of one machine—had made separate and conflicting treaties and were working in different ways and often in hostility to each other. For the India Office was allied with Ibn Saud and gave him money and arms; while the Arab Bureau had allied with Husein and given him money, arms, and promises; and the Foreign Office had signed treaties with the French in conflict with both the others.

CHAPTER XLIV

AT LAST Ibn Saud’s patience began to break down. Complications always irritated him. He sought always to reduce a problem down to its simplest essentials and make a clear decision. He hated to be undecided. Indecision was a pain and agony of mind to him.

On one occasion Philby had involved him in a complicated argument with no end. Polite for a while, eventually Ibn Saud bridled up. He swept Philby’s arguments aside. “By God”, he declared impatiently and beating his walking stick on the ground to emphasize what he said: “By God, I do not weary myself with such speculation. I have enough to do to rule this land righteously in the fear of God until my time comes to die”. That was his philosophy of life.

But his relations with Husein and the English refused to be simplified. He could not make up his mind, and his indecision made him irritable and out of temper.

Moreover, the month of Ramadan, of the Great Fast, had begun. In ordinary times the Fast was a trial of the flesh, but that year it fell in June and was a penance that mortified mind and body. All day from an hour before sunrise until sunset he and all his people fasted, neither eating any food nor drinking; some of the strictest would not even swallow their own spittle. Only at night could they eat and drink and satisfy themselves with their women.

Ibn Saud slept as little as usual, three or four hours at most. All through the parched and dusty summer’s day while the heat and the glare beat down making a furnace of the palace and while even the Ikhwans slept to pass the empty hours and stifle their thirst, he worked, held his councils, did justice, heard complaints, and prayed the regular five times.

But the strain told on him. He rounded on Philby who was always there, as persistent as a summer fly, protecting Husein and urging him to attack the Rashid. “On all sides the allies of the English threaten me. May God cut them off”, he said, using what was for a Wahabi a strong oath, for the Wahabis, unlike the Arabs of Egypt, Syria and
Mesopotamia, whose mouths are always full of blasphemy, rarely swore. “Yet I also am an ally of the English, and still they threaten me. But be minded of this, O Philby! if the English will not protect me from their allies I will defend myself.”

But he began to lose grip. He was ill, tired, irritable and unreasonable, and the English who saw him were surprised how he had lost his fire and self-confidence; how he looked bowed and troubled; how he would talk for hours without sequence and without reaching conclusions.

He was growing unpopular. There was a feeling that there was no leader. The Wahabis were getting out of hand. Husein had sent yet a third force to Khurma and been driven back, but was preparing a big force with artillery to crush the town. The people of Khurma had sent more messengers to Ibn Saud, and with these some of the spoils of the victory, a field-gun, a Turkish automatic rifle, to show what they had done. Finally they had sent him an indignant message: “If it is for the dross of the world’s treasure you seek and that you come not to help us, O Abdul Aziz”, they said, “then tell us. We will excuse you. We have had no benefit for our frequent sending of men to implore your assistance, but next time we will send our women to raise all Nejd to help us.”

The message was known throughout Nejd and roused a storm. The ulema, more ill-natured than usual as a result of fasting, criticized Ibn Saud publicly in the General Council. Sheik Abdul Wahab, the High Priest of Riad, spoke very bitterly saying that Ibn Saud was neglecting the interests of Islam and his own people; he was being led by the nose by the English; it was clear that either they could not or would not check Husein; the people of Khurma had spoken of the “dross of the world’s treasure”, and they

LORD OF ARABIA

had meant the English gold, and rightly. Ibn Saud was selling his birthright for a mess of pottage.

The Wahabis protested against the English being allowed in Riad at all. If a Wahabi met one of the mission he averted his eyes, turned aside, and spat. The Arab servants of the mission were boycotted.

Ibn Saud could not quiet his men by force or persuasion. Dawish was talking of war and the Ikhwan were arming. They told him categorically that unless he would lead them out they would themselves declare war on Husein and march to help Khurma and capture Mecca without him. He could hold them no more, for his grip was slackening.

Suddenly came news that Husein had agreed with the Rashid and Salim of Kuwait to make a concerted attack on Nejd. Husein was collecting men. Salim was egging on the Ajman. The Rashid had called out the Shammar and given them a rendezvous where their fighting men were to collect.

CHAPTER XLV

At once Ibn Saud put out his hands and took a fresh grip. Indecision, like a load that bows a man’s shoulders and drags his feet, had feebled him. He shifted it from him with an angry growl and opened his shoulders. The labyrinthine uncertainties, the wrestling and arguing with himself, the hours of formless talk were finished. He was decided. He had made up his mind. He would attack the Rashid and at once.

He need not quarrel with the English. They would in fact give him more arms and money to go against the Rashid. He could divert the war-fever of the Wahabis
and the Ikhwan, and through the Rashid he could hit indirectly at both Salim and Husein.

Getting a promise from Philby that the English would keep both Salim and Husein from attacking his flanks he sent his eldest son Turki, with a body of the best Ikhwan fighting men and Dawish as his adviser, to harry the Shammar tribes and hold them back.

Next he turned to Sheik Abdul Wahab and the ulema. He swept them along with the vigour of his arguments, over-riding their objections—the Rashid, the hereditary foe, the old enemy who had ruined Nejd before, was still the arch-enemy, he said, and behind him he had the Turks, for they were giving him ten thousand gold pieces a month and arms, and they had promised to make him "The Sultan of Arabia". They all knew what the Turks and the Rashid would do if they came again to Riad. As to inane old Husein, the Sherif, he could wait; he could be dealt with easily later; the English would keep him quiet for the time being; there was nothing to fear from him; but the Rashid was a pressing danger, for he had called up his fighting men, and his Shammar tribesmen were already on the move. He was, in fact, only waiting for a fresh consignment of arms from the Turks before he attacked. They must up and advance straight at him before he was ready.

Having won over the ulema he sent out a call for a general muster of leaders to meet him before the town of Shaqra.

They came eagerly; they wanted war. As the contingents arrived Ibn Saud greeted them and allotted space where each sheik and headman pitched his camp with his banner and spear planted before his tent and his followers with their camels and horses grouped round him.
LORD OF ARABIA

land these last few years; their numbers had increased greatly, and they formed the bulk of his fighting men. He must win them to him now. A false move and their hatred of foreigners would flame out in uncontrollable fanaticism. Dawish would fan the flames and they would sweep him aside and attack Husain against his orders.

For a while he remained silent, thinking, with his eyes cast down, his hands on his knees, motionless, and the great square of men under the red August sun with the desert stretching away behind them remained silent, watching him, waiting for him.

He ran his hand over his beard once or twice and suddenly shot out an arm and spoke, facing them, his face alight. He knew how to handle these men. He understood how to get into their hearts and convince and rouse them. He had all the art and personality of a great orator to reach out to them and fill them with himself. He talked to them now with honeyed words, now called to their religion, fired them with belief in himself, summoned them to gird up their loins and fight for the Faith. “Look you”, he said, raising his voice gradually until all could hear him. “You are my army in that I have no army nor strength save in God and you...... Think not that I am unmindful of what is necessary, and as for the Sherif, think no more of him. Either the English will stop him from attacking Khurma again or—and I give you my word on that—I myself will march against him...... All I need do is to send a member of my family or just a slave and the whole south will rise against the Sherif. And as to the Ajman you do not know of what you talk when you say that the English are supporting them. Why the English say to me: ‘You are foolish. You have the means. Strike now at Hail, and be done for ever with your old enemy, the Rashid’.

132

LORD OF ARABIA

“The English are right. I have the means to strike, and yet I dally. Of what account would be the Ajman if I held Hail? If I were master there the English would leave all the desert tribes to my rule and we should have no more trouble from those who sit on the borders of our land”.

After that he explained to them that the Rashid was the real enemy; he appealed to them to trust him and place their hands in his. Then he called on the ulema present to stand forward and give their opinions. One and all they agreed that the Rashid was the enemy of the Faith.

The Ikhwan, swept from sullen suspicion to passionate agreement, shouted out their approval and beat their foreheads on the ground and wept and cried: “O Abdul Aziz, why did thou not trust in us before and we would have fought for thee without suspicion”.

Once more Ibn Saud was their trusted leader. The tribesmen crowded to his tent, to touch his hand in fealty. At evening they made two long lines in the desert behind the camp and in the centre of the first two paces in front as Imam, as the leader, towering above them all, stood Ibn Saud. Behind him, taking no part in the prayers, was a giant negro, with a drawn sword in his hand, guarding him against a chance enemy.

All took their time from Ibn Saud, prayed in unison, did their obeisances to Mecca, chanted the “Amens” in answer to his invocations as he recited the opening chapter of the Koran.

“Praise be to Thee, O God, Creator of the Worlds, The Beneficent, The Compassionate, Lord of the Day of Judgment. Thee, O God, Thee only do we worship, and Thee only do we beseech for help. Guide us on the right path,
the path of those Thou hast blest, not of those with whom
Thou art displeased, or of those who have gone astray”.

After that Ibn Saud turned to them. “Get you gone
every man to his house”, he said. “Haste! Make ready
for war! and having set your houses in order meet me at
Buraidah at the new moon and, God in His Mercy, will give
us victory”.

CHAPTER XLVI

A month later, leading the vanguard himself, Ibn
Saud made a forced march on Hail. His spies had located
the Rashid raiding away to the west and the town was
poorly defended.

Between Ibn Saud and Hail were the shepherd tribes of
the Beni Yatraf, and being loyal to the Rashid they resisted
stoutly. Driving into them Ibn Saud flung them aside,
but the delay was sufficient to warn the Rashid who
hurried back into Hail, shut the gates of the town, and
prepared for a siege.

Ibn Saud did not want a siege. The Shammar had
plenty of fight in them, and his tribesmen would grow rest-
less if forced to sit round a town. They had taken good
loot, animals, arms, and some gold from the Beni Yatraf
and wanted to go home. He had done what he set out to
do, taught the Rashid and the Turks a lesson, frightened
Salim, and broken up the confederacy against him and for
the time being satisfied both the English and his Wahabis.

The Rashid asked for peace. Ibn Saud agreed and having
divided the spoil marched home in triumph.

CHAPTER XLVII

As Ibn Saud marched back from Hail to Riad the
English under General Allenby in Palestine and General
Marshall in Baghdad advanced driving the disorganized
Turks before them.

Allenby swept up through Palestine and took Damascus.
King Hussein sent his men forward under his son Feisal
and with T. E. Lawrence, to help Allenby, Marshall took
Mosul, and in conjunction with Allenby they thrust the
Turks over the Taurus mountains and out of all the Arab
countries. Bulgaria and Turkey prayed for an armistice.
Austria followed. Rotted through by gnawing revolution
Germany caved in like a worn shell. The World War was
over.

On the heels of the War came the Great Influenza Plague
of 1918. The disease bred out of bodies of the starved
peoples of Russia and Germany, matured by the agony
and strain, torn men, filth, litter of unburied corpses on all
the fronts, mildewed fields, the fear and despair of millions
in all Europe, came creeping, insidious, gaining strength
as it came uncheckable, relentless, across the world, a
pestilence killing more men than the War itself.

It swept across Arabia. It decimated the bedouin and
the villagers of Nejd. It burst into Riad, smote the towns-
men, taking the strong before the weak until there was a
death in every house. In the palace it killed Turki, Ibn
Saud’s first-born, a gallant brave youth, his heir and the
apple of his eye; and in the royal harem it killed Jauhara,
his Queen.

While all Riad lamented its dead, in the palace Ibn Saud
sat alone, mourning. He had married many wives, but
Jauhara had been the only woman he had loved. She had been his cousin and a princess of the Saud family. His mother had arranged the marriage many years before. Ibn Saud had been a young man then, still fighting for his bare existence against the Rashid, and Jauhara had been but seventeen.

She had been beautiful and talented far beyond the ordinary Arab girl. He had fallen passionately in love with her. Once they had quarrelled and parted for a while, but very soon he had known that he could not live without her and she had come back to him. She had borne him two sons. The years had only increased his passion for her, and he had made her his Queen.

All his life Ibn Saud had enjoyed women, women as wives and companions, women as mothers of his children. He was happy with women round him. He made no secret of the fact. He had nothing to conceal. He had no abnormal vices. These hardly existed among the desert people. If a man sought such lecheries he must go to the great cities of other countries. He had had many wives. He made no apologies and explanations for them, for he had broken no conventions thereby.

He did not need any excuses. He observed the principles of his religion. “I follow the Prophet, the Peace of God be upon him”, he said. “What he sanctions I take. What he enjoins I obey. My wives shall always be to the full number that he has allowed”.

One day in 1917 when talking to Belhaven he had expressed his surprise that in enlightened England adultery and fornication should go unpunished—in the desert the penalty for adultery was death by stoning and for fornication public flogging—and that they should be even glorified

in and praised in books and poems. Belhaven, piqued, retaliated. “How many women have you had?” he asked.

“I have four wives as the Prophet allows”, replied Ibn Saud.

“But how many have you had and how many have you divorced?”

“I have married and divorced a hundred, and if God wills I shall marry and divorce many more”, he replied.

On another occasion he was talking with Philby on marriage and divorce. “By God”, he said, “in my lifetime I have married many wives, and by the Grace of God I have not done with wiving yet. I am still young and strong. And now with the losses of the War assuredly the time will come when the people of Europe will see wisdom, and the men take more wives than one each”.

He could not understand a man having only one wife. It was unreal, a subject for jest. Such a man was to be pitied, and he should go to the doctors and be revived.

He lived strictly and devoutly by the rules laid down by the Prophet. Christ had given no instructions for the number of wives for Christians. Mohamed claimed to complete the revelation of Christ and had laid down:

“Thou mayst take two, three, or four wives, but no more”.

He gave wives a high position, special rights of property, alimony, and ordered that they should be treated well, saying:

“If thou canst not deal equitably and justly with each and all thou shouldst take only one”;

but he made divorce easy.
LORD OF ARABIA

It was Ibn Saud's custom to keep three wives, and the fourth place empty so that he could fill it as he wished. If there was no vacant place when he needed one he divorced to make the vacancy. He kept no concubines, had no forbidden liaisons or illegitimate children. He treated his wives well and kept them in state. Each evening after he had prayed and finished the day's work, towards nine o'clock, he went for a while to the harem, and no wife ever complained that he neglected her.

He married for many reasons. Sometimes they were political so as to strengthen his position by alliances with important families, as when he took a girl from the family of Abdul Wahab in Riad to link himself with the religious leaders. He had a wife from the Sudair, another from the Mutair, one from the Annaza tribe, another from the Dawasir. One by one he married into all the leading families. They did not resent the divorces, which carried no stigma, and roused no ill-feeling. It was an honour that one of their women had been married with the Saud, and if she bore him children there was a direct bond of blood.

Moreover, Ibn Saud looked after the women he divorced, gave them money and found them new husbands if they were childless and if they were mothers of his children accepted them and gave them slaves and a house in which to bring up the children.

Sometimes again he married to cement the loyalty of a tribe newly conquered, or to give a family that had fallen on evil days and which he desired to raise, a new position, or because it was his duty as when he married the widow of his dead brother Sad.

But he married, also, because being a vigorous, healthy man he desired women. He loved a good fight, a good song, and he was a tremendous lover.

Nevertheless through all the complications of his life and despite all the women who came to him, during the many years of their marriage Jauhara had been his one woman. She was his Queen.

The death of Turki nearly broke his heart. For Jauhara he mourned long. Her death for a while obliterated all else. All that late winter and the first days of the spring of 1919, which were wild and beautiful with fresh sunshine and bursts of rain sweeping across the plateau of Nejd, Ibn Saud mourned and would not be comforted. He saw no one. He shut himself away alone. He closed the rooms where Jauhara had lived in the palace, leaving all untouched as had left them, and, except for his sister Nura, he allowed no woman to enter them.

He kept her slaves and servants and every Friday after the Morning Prayer he made a pilgrimage to her grave in the great cemetery of Riad.

CHAPTER XLVIII

Out of the shadow of grief Ibn Saud was forced back into life by the need of action.

Abdullah was on the move against him. Hitherto Abdullah and his men had been besieging Medina where the Turkish garrison under Fikri Pasha had still held out. Even when the Armistice with Turkey had been signed Fikri Pasha had refused to give in, but early in 1919, cut off and surrounded, short of food, without any hope of relief, his men dying of disease, he surrendered. At once Abdullah turned on Ibn Saud and marched into the Ataiba country to force the tribes to submission and to recapture Khurma.
LORD OF ARABIA

Ibn Saud took up the challenge. He was glad of action, glad to be up and doing and not sitting thinking. His patience too was at an end: the ulema had been right when they had said that either the English could not or would not hold back Husein and his son. At Shafa they had sworn to the Ikhwan to defend Khurma if it was again attacked, and now he would go to the help of Khurma.

This time he had no difficulties. Men came flocking in to his call, eager, shouting to march to the defence of Khurma and of their Wahabi brethren against Husein, who called himself King of Arabia - Husein, the heretic, the apostate, the traitor who had sold his people to the English.

The English in Egypt offered to arbitrate. Both Ibn Saud and Husein continued to prepare, but whereas Husein did it openly with much boasting, Ibn Saud with greater wisdom acted quietly. He would let Husein take the offensive and put himself in the wrong.

The English held a conference in Cairo. Husein had been their active ally in the war, and he would still be useful in peace. Whereas, of Ibn Saud they thought little. At most he was a successful tribal sheik of the Inner Desert. They were sure that Husein with his English-trained army, his Syrians officers, and the rifles and machine-guns which they had given him would easily drive Ibn Saud back to where he belonged, to the Inner Desert, out of the way.

They decided to support Husein. They warned Ibn Saud back, and ordered that he restore Khurma to Husein, threatening that if he advanced farther they would “render to King Husein all assistance” in their power. Further they threatened to reduce or cut off his gold subsidy if he did not listen.

“Success”, replied Ibn Saud with dignity, “comes from God alone. I do not deserve to suffer the loss you threaten ... but if you decide to cut off the subsidy, God be Praised, my honour will remain unurtained. I shall be free to act according to the dictates of my honour”.

CHAPTER XLIX

With the full sympathy of the English, Abdullah with four thousand regular troops armed with modern rifles and machine-guns and ten thousand bedouin marched on Khurma and halted at the village of Turaba. Ibn Saud was already at the wells of Sakha to the east. Both were converging on Khurma when Luwai, the headman of Khurma, acted on his own.

Khurma was full of Ikhwan volunteers. Spies had brought word to Luwai that Abdullah had pitched camp in the oasis beyond Turaba and had neither taken any precautions nor even posted sentries. It was already late May, and the moon was in the third quarter and the night dark. There had been a rainstorm and a low mist increased the darkness.

Luwai made a sudden night march and attacked. He caught the enemy asleep, the officers undressed a-bed. His Ikhwan rushed the camp, meeting with no resistance, and they killed silently with their swords and knives, taking no prisoners and giving no quarter.

Abdullah ran for a horse and galloped away to safety in his night-shirt without stopping until he reached Mecca and ran, still in his night-shirt, pell-mell into the palace, straight up to his father, shaking and jabbering, with all the boast frightened out of him, and his bedouin melted
away or deserted to Luwai. Of the four thousand regular troops only a hundred escaped: all the rifles, machine-guns, tents, and stores were captured. The army of Husein had ceased to exist.

As soon as the news was out the people of Taif ran for safety. Mecca was at that moment full of foreign pilgrims who fled down the road to Jeddah and demanded to be shipped away. The terror of the Wahabis and the Ikhwan filled all the Hejaz. Husein, stout-hearted but hysterical with anger, cursed Abdullah, drove him out of the palace, and sent frantic massages to the English for help.

Ibn Saud with his main body marched into Turaba. He walked across the battle-field exulting. All the country round was strewn with corpses and litter of tents and stores which had been looted: his enemies had been destroyed and not by his army but by an unorganized crowd of his Ikhwan. His Ikhwan had shown their fighting metal. Before him the road to Mecca lay open, and Husein and all the Hejaz were at his mercy.

CHAPTER I

As Ibn Saud prepared to advance, the English again warned him back. He calculated quietly: Turaba had been an easy victory and the excited Ikhwan were shouting to be led on to Mecca: he hated Husein: he desired revenge: to conquer the Hejaz, the Sacred Land of Islam, was his ambition; the road ahead seemed open and without obstacles. His advisers urged him on. They even hinted at his lack of courage to seize the chance, but he would not be hurried or hustled. He considered coolly.

It was a characteristic of Ibn Saud, this steady self-control, this power to judge and value facts in their real proportion, to remain cool and critical even in the heat and turmoil of great events when those round him were in a frenzy of excitement—and it was a characteristic which had many times saved him from error and disaster.

He saw clearly the tremendous power of the English. He saw how since they had been victorious in the World War, they had stood astride the whole East and Middle East holding all in their grip. He realized that they meant to support Husein; and he realized that at the moment he could not fight the English.

For many years he had been an absolute ruler and surrounded by men, afraid of him, who fawned on him and flattered him continuously. He was used to obedience, to having his own way, and he was unused to opposition. It would have been natural if, urged on by his victory and driven by his ambition, he had ignored facts and advanced ahead. But, realizing his limitations, he decided to withdraw. Calling his sheiks and headmen he advised them that the time was not yet: they had good loot enough to keep them comfortable for many months: a more convenient time would come later. He persuaded them to lead the men home, and he called off the Ikhwan. His leadership was now unchallenged and they obeyed him.

Placing a garrison in Khurma and receiving the submission of the Ataiba, he marched away into the Inner Desert, turning his back on the open road to Mecca, to the conquest of the Sacred Land and the renown which such a conquest would bring him.

As he went he realized that, though the Turks were gone, the English had taken their place and inherited their policies.