PART IX
CHAPTER LI

IBN SAUD had drawn off, but he had not given up his ambitions. He had decided that when the time came he would advance again, conquer the Hejaz and rule all Arabia, but for the moment he returned to Riad and waited and watched for his chance.

All round him was in a state of flux. The Great War had smashed the Turkish Empire into pieces. As long as it existed, despite its rottenness and its feeble administration, nonetheless it had, by the prestige of age and of long-established government, held all the Middle East and the Arab countries together as one whole. The Turks were gone. The ancient control and system had disappeared. The Turkish Empire had broken up into a debris of jarring, rough-edged, and undefined pieces—Syria, Palestine, the Hejaz, the Yemen, the Asir, Iraq, Egypt, Central Arabia. For the moment they were kept together by the English. At the summit of their World Power, with immense prestige and vast military forces, the English held the Arab countries together as the cords of a net might hold a pile of broken pieces. They had garrisons in Cairo and Constantinople, in Baghdad, Aleppo, and Damascus, from the Red Sea to the Black Sea, and from the Balkans and Egypt to India and the Persian Gulf. The future of all the Arab countries was in their hands. Only in Central Arabia, in Nejd, they had no direct control.

But to continue to hold these vast lands indefinitely was impossible. It would require immense armies, and already the English soldiers, war-weary, and without interest in the Arabs, were demanding to be demobilized and sent home; and the people of England were insisting that all foreign commitments should be reduced at once: they were not prepared to expend money or men on the Arabs.

To meet the situation the English Government devised a simple, clear-cut scheme. They planned a Confederacy of Arab States held together by a common language and a common religion, ruled over by one head and controlled by themselves, and this would require little money and few soldiers. Husein, as Sherif of Mecca, should be the head of the Confederacy. They had already promised him this during the War. As Guardian of the Sacred Cities of Islam he still had much prestige among Moslems. They would make him Caliph of Islam, for he would be useful in dealing with the Moslems in India, and he would, they thought, be easy to control. Under him his sons should rule the new states.

The scheme seemed simple and easy. It soon became complicated with difficulties. It was not based on realities. There was no national Arab feeling. None of the Arab countries wished to combine and certainly not under Husein. Each was split by internal dissensions. Two of the principal states, Syria and Palestine, had already been promised, Syria to the French and Palestine to the Jews as a national home. Husein claimed both and refused to agree to anything until his claim was satisfied. The French and the Jews were equally determined that the promises made to them should be fulfilled. The French, and the other Allies, resented the English control of the Arab countries and worked against the formation of the Confederacy.

Moreover, Husein and his family were not fit to play
their rôles. His elder and youngest sons, Ali and Zaid, were poor creatures. Abdullah was an incapable, fat, blustering fellow. Feisal, the third and best, was pleasant in manner but weak in character, while Husein himself had neither the capacity or character nor position to carry out his part. Autocratic and obstinate he was disliked by his own people and despised by all Moslems as the man who had, for his own glory and worldly advancement, betrayed his brother Moslems, the Turks, and sold his own country to the English—the Arabs looked on the Turks, now they were defeated and gone, as their brother Moslems and as martyrs. Husein and his sons might be bolstered up by the English, but they could never stand alone.

The experts who advised the English Government increased the complications. Grouped round T. E. Lawrence they fought tooth and nail for Husein and his family.

Lawrence was the man who in 1916 had been sent from Egypt to save Husein's revolt from being crushed by the Turks. He had become the driving force of the Arab revolt and had led Husein's men to victory and to Damascus. His magnificent war-time exploits had given him great prestige in England. He was accepted as the expert on Arabia, and he led the English Government by the nose down the wrong path. In Cairo, in London, at the Peace Conference in Paris, he demanded that the promises given to Husein should be kept while those given to the French and the Jews should be broken. Husein was encouraged to extreme obstinacy by his attitude, especially as he treated the French with such brutal candour—a candour with which he concealed much ignorance—that in negotiations with them he was as sand in the machinery, and the French became resentful and unyielding. He was obsessed with the Arab Confederacy and could not see that it was unworkable. He did not know or he ignored the worthlessness of Husein. Of Arabia as a whole, of the Inner Desert, of the Wahabis and Ikhwan, and above all of Ibn Saud he was ignorant. St. John Philby, who had been the English delegate in Riad, knew the facts. Lawrence refused to listen to him, and he misjudged the strength and value of Ibn Saud.

For the English, Ibn Saud was no more than a tribal sheik successful for the moment, who had appeared suddenly out of the desert with his murdering bedouin and his wild, fanatical Wahabis and Ikhwan. There was no place for him in their Arab Confederacy.

He was not of great importance they said—Turaba had been an unfortunate incident—but as a raider and a destroyer he interfered with their plans and he must be shut back into the desert. Their Confederacy of Arab States would form a ring round him and do that.

CHAPTER LII

Away in Riad, Ibn Saud heard of some of these things. He sent messengers to the French in Damascus for news and to get into touch with them, and what he heard made him uneasy.

As soon as the Turks had gone the Rashid had placed himself under the protection of Husein. Now there was news that the English in Baghdad were considering an alliance with the Rashid against Ibn Saud. That was the old Turkish method of playing one against the other. Salim of Kuwait, protected by the English, was working against him once more. Husein was boasting that the
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English had promised him help, and that he would recover Khurma, overrun Nejd, and revenge himself. The English had made Feisal King of Damascus and created a new State of Transjordania.

Ibn Saud called to the English to know whether they were still his friends. Late in 1920 he met Sir Percy Cox, who was the English High Commissioner in Baghdad, at Ojair; but he came away from the conference only half-satisfied.

Round him still, shutting him back into the desert, closing all ways out, was forming a ring of his enemies. Feisal, while Lawrence cried and threatened in impotent rage, had been ejected by the French from Damascus, but the English had made him King of Iraq. Abdullah they had accepted as Amir of Transjordania.

From Kuwait, where Salim was his enemy and protected by the English—to Basra and Baghdad—where Feisal was an English-made king—across the desert by the country of the Rashid and his Shammar tribes to Transjordania—where Abdullah his enemy was Amir and English protected—down the Hejaz to Mecca and the frontier of Asir, there was a half-moon of his enemies supported by the English. With the sea-coast states, which were under English protection or alliance, there was a ring shutting him in every side, except in the Hasa.

He would have struck at once and broken the ring of enemies, but wherever he turned he found the English supporting them, and he could not fight the English.

A lesser man might have lost his self-control and shown his animosity, but Ibn Saud held his hand, kept down his anger. He must bide his time. He accepted the English subsidy as before. He remained courteous and friendly, but he watched and waited for his opportunity.

CHAPTER LII

While he waited, in the early summer of 1921, the opportunity came to him. The Rashid was the weak point in the ring round him. Ibn Saud had long since realized that and, as he had done with the Ataiba, he had sent out his preachers who had gone fearlessly up and down the Shammar tribes. The doctrines they taught, those of Abdul Wahab, touched something deep down in the hearts of all the desert people, and set them aflame with a religious en-
thusiasm which destroyed all their normal loyalties to their sheiks and tribes. The preachers converted many of the Shammar, persuading them to forsake the Rashid and look to Ibn Saud. With this insidious propaganda—siesta, “diplomacy”, he called it— Ibn Saud split the Shammar in their allegiance.

Moreover, the Shammar had no leader. The head of the Rashid family had been murdered that spring, and the rest were fighting among themselves for his place, so that they were powerless. Nuri Shalan, who was the sheik of Ruwallah, had sent men raiding down from Syria, who had taken the great oasis of Jaff which lay to the north of Hail, and the Shammar had been unable to resist them. Ibn Saud saw that there was no strength left in the Rashid or the Shammar.

Everything was working in his favour. Salim of Kuwait, morose, ill-natured, cantankerous, hating Ibn Saud to the end, had died, and his successor Ahmed, wanted peace. Husein had promised the Shammar help, but he was tied by his own difficulties in the Hejaz where he had become more and more unpopular with his own people. Above all the English had their hands full. In Iraq there had been a fierce revolt against them. In Egypt, in India and in Turkey they were loaded down with troubles. Feisal of Baghdad without the English could do nothing. The time to strike had nearly come.

When Ibn Saud acted he did so with such explosive suddenness that often it seemed as if he was driven by the haphazard and unreasoning impulses of the bedouin. In reality he never acted without careful thought. He often hid his thoughts behind a mask of indecision, but behind that mask he pondered deliberately, considered the evi-

dence, weighed the facts, and decided, but only with great caution. Caution was his outstanding characteristic in reaching a decision—such caution that often misled his enemies and even friends into thinking that he could not make up his mind. Then suddenly he was convinced. He decided. He acted, with speed, ruthlessly, and without looking back.

So now he considered with caution, turning over in his mind and judging each factor, testing each step carefully before he took it. The Ikhwan were restless and demanding action. His advisers urged him to move, grew irritated at his indecision. Unmoved, unhurried, he kept steadily on his way until he saw the time and place best fitted to strike.

He sent out raiding parties towards Hail to test the position. They found little opposition and came back with good loot. Husein and Feisal warned the English of what was coming and appealed to them to hold Ibn Saud back. The English would have none of it: this was a quarrel between two rulers in the Inner Desert, they said, and no affair of theirs.

That was the only thing which Ibn Saud wanted to know. As soon as he knew that the English would not help Husein he struck.

He declared war, and moved at top speed. He sent Dawish with two thousand of the Ikhwan to hold the Shammar, and despatched his fast camel messengers to summon contingents from the Ikhwan, the villagers and the tribesmen.

They came in hurrying, eager to fight. He received them, gave them their places in the march, in camp, and in the battle line, and divided out the camels between their fighting men. As he prepared, news came to him one night
that the Shammar had attacked Dawish who had beaten them back only with difficulty. Fakhad, the Governor of Buraidha, and many of his men had been killed in a cavalry charge.

There was no time to lose. He gave orders to break camp. In the grey light before dawn, after his slaves had struck his tent and he had prayed, he sat in the open transacting the last state affairs and giving final instructions. He was irritable. He chid those near him, flying into sudden anger, for now delay drove him to fury. He wanted to be up and off. The confusion of the camp as the slaves loaded the baggage annoyed him. Why did they take so long? Some of the tribes had not yet arrived. They were very dilatory. As the dawn flushed across the sky all were ready waiting beside their camels, and he gave the signal.

Mut rif of Riad, his standard bearer, rode out ahead and unfurled his green-and-white flag. Behind Mut rif, all his irritation gone now that he was on the move, rode Ibn Saud, high up on his great yellow camel, towering above all. Beside him was his eldest son Saud, a youth of nineteen, and round him his guards, a thousand of the best fighting men of Nejd with their slaves, behind them their camels swaying on the trot. On his right the Ikhwan in a solid mass and on his left the Dawasir in line. After him in line upon line came the towns men, villagers and tribesmen, marching behind their headmen and sheikhs, with their banners unfurled.

Ibn Saud had chosen his time well. The Shammar, without leaders, without co-ordination, honeycombed with disloyalty by the propaganda of the preachers, threatened in the back by Nuri Shalan's men, and without allies or help—Husein of Mecca had failed them; Feisal of Baghdad was a broken reed—gave way everywhere. Across the grey granite country round Hail, Ibn Saud and his men swept up to the town itself, besieged it, and captured it.

Putting a garrison into Hail and sending his son forward with a detachment, he marched on through the Shammar country. Many of the tribesmen and villagers fled into Iraq where Feisal gave them protection, for he calculated that one day they might be useful. The rest submitted and swore fealty to Ibn Saud. Those he trusted he left under their own leaders. Over the rest he appointed his governors, but he dealt with them all generously. The males of the Rashid family he sent to Riad. He treated them well, gave them houses and slaves, but kept them as hostages under his eye, and he married the widow of the murdered Rashid, adopted his children, and so linked himself to the family by blood.

In triumph he rode back. The people of Riad, led by his father, came out to welcome him; the Conqueror of their hereditary enemy; for many years no Saud had ruled in Hail.

In full Council, in the Great Audience Chamber of the Palace before the assembled leaders of the people, the ulema, the headmen and the sheikhs with Abdur Rahman presiding, they proclaimed him Sultan of Nejd and its Dependencies. He was ruler of all Central Arabia.