

PART IV

CHAPTER XX

THE RAPID success of Ibn Saud did not, however, suit the Turks. As before they were the nominal rulers of all Arabia, but they held only its fringes with troops and their governors, in the Yemen, up the Red Sea Coast through the Hejaz, across Syria and down the Euphrates river to Baghdad; and along the Persian Gulf to the Hasa—a ring of rich lands round the Inner Desert. And as ever they played the tribes one against the other, backing the weak against the strong. They had opposed the Rashid when he was strong. Now they opposed Ibn Saud.

Lately old Abdul Hamid, the Turkish Sultan, had become ambitious. He wished to revive the Ottoman Empire; to become a great Sultan and Caliph as his ancestors had been before him; and to rule in Central Arabia itself.

The Germans encouraged him. They had already started building the Baghdad railway towards the East, and were sending out traders and agents into the Persian Gulf, and watching for the chance to outwit the English, to push them out of the Gulf and to take Kuwait.

For them Ibn Saud was dangerous. He was in alliance with Mubarak of Kuwait. He was said to be friendly with the English. He was farther away and more difficult to control than the Rashid. They encouraged Abdul Hamid to use the Rashid.

Sultan Abdul Hamid sent more troops to the Yemen and the Hejaz, increased the garrisons in Baghdad and the Hasa, ordered a railway to be built from Damascus down the Hejaz to Medina, and made an agreement with the

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Rashid that he should rule Central Arabia as his representative. Ibn Saud was interfering with his plans. The Rashid, his nominee, was calling for help. He ordered the Governor of Baghdad to send troops to smash Ibn Saud.

Early in the summer of 1904, eight battalions of regular Turkish troops with six light guns slung between mules marched out of Samarah, a village on the Euphrates River, to the rendezvous to which the Rashid had called the Shammar tribes, and with them advanced into Nejd and threatened Anaiza and Buraida.

Ibn Saud collected every man he could to meet them. Finding them entrenched in a camp near the village of Bukariya he camped over against them.

The Rashid was well supplied. Besides arms and men the Turks had sent him money. Ibn Saud was short of all supplies. He had not enough rations for his men. That night they must sleep hungry. Except for a handful of dates they had nothing to eat all day. They were grumbling and disheartened. It was a poor preparation for a fight, but he could only promise them food when they took the enemy's camp.

Towards evening he went out to reconnoitre the ground ahead, when he saw away to the east a cloud of dust up against the evening sun. More men for the Rashid, he concluded, but his scouts reported that it was not fighting men but a small raiding party bringing sheep into the enemy's camp.

At once Ibn Saud called his men to horse. There was no time to saddle or bridle. Leading the way he galloped them close past the Shammar camp, straight for the sheep, cut down the escort, and each man heaved a sheep up over his horse's cruppers and turned for home.

Already the Shammar were out after them, far outnumbering them, firing from the saddle and shouting as they came.

Ibn Saud with a few men dashed across their front to head them off. After him they went, realized their mistake and turned back too late to cut off the rest. It was a running fight at full gallop in the gloaming.

That night Ibn Saud's camp was full of life; the raid had excited and put new life into the men. They were boasting of the exploits of Ibn Saud and what they would do with the Shammar on the morrow. They ate meat and were satisfied.

Before dawn Ibn Saud attacked—it was July 15th, and the heat was intense.

He sent his men at the enemy's flanks. Time and again they drove the Shammar tribesmen back, but always the Turkish infantry stood firm in the centre and the tribesmen rallied round them.

In the late forenoon the Turks opened with their guns. Ibn Saud's men were not used to shells and began to give way. He rode ahead, exposing himself, to encourage them. A shell burst close beside him; a splinter took away half a finger of his left hand and the shrapnel wounded him in the left knee. Streaming with blood he was forced to draw off. His men began to panic and run. With difficulty he held them together, gave them heart and retired back in some formation.

The Rashid was too badly mauled to come after him. He had lost a thousand men. The Turks could do nothing in the great heat. They made camp outside the village of Shinanah, let Ibn Saud go, and turned instead to subdue the villages of the Qasim and northern Nejd.

NEVER did Ibn Saud show himself better than in defeat. When things were bad and everyone round him in despair he grew genial and optimistic.

His wounds, which would have incapacitated an ordinary man, hardly held him up. He had them bandaged and laughed at them. He set to work at once to find allies and make a confederacy.

He sent messengers to the Mutair, the Ataiba, and the Dawasir and even far away to the north to the tribes of the Muntafik and the Anazah.

With infinite patience he dealt personally with the quarrelsome, touchy sheiks. It needed rare skill and tact to persuade them to settle their differences, smooth over their feuds, and combine to one object. It was as if one collected the thousand jagged pieces of a broken vase, and joined the pieces together, knowing that one mistake, one blow, would smash it again into a thousand jagged pieces. He argued that they must all fight the Rashid, for he had brought in the Turks, and that if the Turks came with the Germans behind them it would be the end of their freedom.

Hobbling from his knee-wound he went among his own people, rousing them, cheering them, collecting every man with a rifle, and before the Rashid and the Turks realized it, he was at them with a new force.

He found them marching up the dry bed of the Rima river. They were coming back to the camp at Shinanah after subduing some of the Nejd villages. Before they could form to meet him Ibn Saud attacked.

Again his men drove the Shammar back on the flanks and, again the Turkish regular troops stood firm as a rally-

ing point, but the Mutair who were on Ibn Saud's left wing began to give. He realized that if he was defeated a second time he was done. Collecting all the men he could, leading the way with his bodyguard behind him and shouting the name of his sister Nura as his war-cry he charged on horseback straight at the Turkish centre.

The Turkish line bent and broke. Ibn Saud burst through them and then back again, cutting them down. The Shammar, seeing the Turks break, scattered and ran.

The Turks re-formed. Ibn Saud surrounded them. That night they started to retreat in formation. The next day they plodded on across the sand. They were parched by the blistering sun. They ran out of water. They lost their way. They were in thick uniforms and heavily laden, a desperate column of weary men plodding forward with their heads down.

Round them Ibn Saud sent his light-moving Arabs, swarming like flies, harrying them with incessant raids and sniping. Some fell out and the bedouin women cut their throats. Some straggled and were cut down by the horsemen. Some surrendered and a few limped painfully back to Basra.

CHAPTER XXII

THE TURKS could not allow such a defeat to go unrevenged. It struck at the basis of their prestige in Arabia. They began to prepare a large force on the Euphrates to deal with Ibn Saud decisively.

Those round Ibn Saud, his advisers and the Wahabi leaders were arrogant with success, full of boasting and war talk, but he had no delusions. He saw clearly that, though he had defeated the Turkish nominee, the Rashid,

and the few Turks with him, yet if the Turkish Empire put out its strength it could crush him. He must avoid that. He would go slowly and fob the danger off while it was still far away, and he got into touch with Muklis Pasha, the Governor of Basra, and persuaded Mubarak to act as intermediary.

Mubarak arranged a meeting at which Abdur Rahman on behalf of Ibn Saud and Muklis Pasha met and came to terms: the Turks recognized Ibn Saud as the ruler of Nejd including the Qasim on condition that they kept a nominal force in the district and garrisons in Anaiza and Buraida.

The danger of serious attack was for the moment postponed.

The Turkish garrisons arrived but very soon found themselves isolated. Ibn Saud gave them no help. They could not keep order or security. All the roads became infested with raiders who looted the convoys which brought their ammunition and supplies from Basra. They could do nothing in retaliation. If they moved outside the walls of the towns in small numbers, they were surrounded and killed. If they went out in large numbers they moved too slowly to catch the light-moving bedouin.

At the end of a year the Turkish soldiers were in rags, almost reduced to starvation. In some places they were eating the pith of the date-palms for their only ration. Many were selling their arms for a little food. They had nicknamed the Qasim "The Devil's Daughter". They were without heart or spirit. Dying of disease and the violence of the sun they were deserting in numbers.

The Turkish Government pressed Ibn Saud to give them active help. He gave them fair words but no help. They tried him with a subsidy in gold. He needed gold.

It was the handle to all power. It meant arms and allies. He needed it urgently, but with a gesture he refused and returned a present the Turks had sent him.

He had in fact realized that conditions had changed. The Turks were in difficulties. The Yemen and the Hejaz were in revolt. Syria was honeycombed with revolutionary committees, working for Arab independence and to eject the Turks. In the Balkans, in Egypt, in Turkey, and in Constantinople itself there was disorder and the threat of upheaval and revolution.

He knew that now the Turks could not concentrate against him nor even supply or help their garrisons in the Qasim. He might have attacked them, defeated them, and driven them out by force and so gained renown and prestige. Those round him urged him to take action. He preferred to wait and to let time and necessity work for him.

As he had foreseen, needing every man they could mobilize and realizing their helplessness, the Turks reduced their garrisons in the Qasim and then withdrew them. They had learned their lesson. Leaving a few garrisons along the Hasa coast they went and returned no more to Central Arabia.

CHAPTER XXIII

HAVING jockeyed the Turks into going without making war, Ibn Saud was once more face to face with his rival the Rashid. He was on the top of the tide now, winning. His renown was growing. More and more tribesmen were joining him, but he could not relax.

Rashid was as stout-hearted as himself. The desert was full of chances. One serious error and his fickle, treacher-

ous allies would leave him and his patchwork of alliances would tear to pieces under him.

During these years he lived in constant danger. He must be always ready not only for the enemy's raids and sudden night attacks, but also for treachery in his own camp. Any night his closest allies might turn on him and murder him. His tent was always pitched either clear of the camp or so that there were no other tents before or behind it; his bodyguard close round him. He slept but little, some two or three hours a night.

When on active service he never used a bed but lay on a rug on the sand with his drawn sword beside him. Sometimes he did not even lie down but squatted on his heels, his chin on his hands and his hands folded over the hilt of his sword stuck upright in the sand.

From sleep he could, like a coiled snake, in one movement come straight into the striking position.

Once a servant blundered into his tent without warning and Ibn Saud had sliced his shoulder and arm away before the man could call out. His horse stood picketed by the tent, and if there were an alarm he was up and away riding without saddle or bridle.

He became as lean and muscular as a wild animal. The desert life kept his body taut and as firm as marble. He had no liking for sedentary town life. He ate and drank sparingly. His vigour was immense. He worked all day and most of the night. He would sit in the mouth of his tent interviewing all who came, hearing complaints, deciding cases, listening to reports, and judging the truth of the news. He had a great knowledge of the country and the lives and histories of all the tribes, and he saw personally to the details of camp and food arrangements and gave his own orders and made the plans of action. Even when he

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was busiest he performed his religious observances strictly, fasted, read the Koran, and prayed five times a day.

When there was a raid or a fight he was the first on the move, eyes afire and as excited as a boy going out to play.

Except for his very few hours of sleep he was never still. He wore out those round him and he fought the Rashid steadily back until at last he cornered and finished him.

The Rashid had been raiding. After a long march he came to the village of Muhanna and camped. His men were tired. He himself was growing more and more disheartened and casual as he grew older. Believing that Ibn Saud was many miles away he took no special precaution for the night.

Ibn Saud was in fact many miles away, but as soon as his scouts brought him the news he made a forced march in the dark. At dawn a thick dust storm blew up. Under cover of this he attacked, caught the enemy unprepared, and smashed them into flight.

The Rashid could have escaped, but he stood his ground, shouting his battle-cry to rally his men. Almost alone he was shot down at close quarters. His head was stuck on a pole and paraded through the villages so that the tribes should know he was dead.

At once among the Shammar and in the Hail there was confusion. The Rashid's successor was a weakling. All the males of the family fought between themselves for power, killing and murdering each other. The tribes, without a strong man to lead them, dispersed to their homes to quarrel and fight among themselves.

They would have combined against an invader, but they had no desire to go conquering. For the time being they were no more danger to Ibn Saud.

PART V

CHAPTER XXIV

IBN SAUD was twenty-seven, enormous in build, strong, lean, and hard, an accepted leader with a reputation as a fierce fighter and all the prestige of victory behind him, a tremendous virile force of a man who had defeated the Turks, overthrown the Rashid, and conquered Nejd by the strength of his own right arm.

But he was by no means established. Difficulties and dangers came crowding in on him from inside as well as from out. The desert Arabs would not accept a new master so easily. They were like sand, each tribe and individual a fiercely independent unit. Like sand they could be held together between strong hands, but they could not be moulded into one plastic piece. And if the strong hands grew slack or loosened, like sand they escaped and fell strewn out into units as fiercely independent as before.

They had joined Ibn Saud not out of loyalty but because they thought they would have more liberty to raid and loot, when the Rashid was beaten. But the hand of Ibn Saud was heavy on them. He forbade them to raid without his permission and he punished, without pity, all who disobeyed him, and the tribesmen grew restless and rebellious under the restraint.

In Riad itself the ulema looked at Ibn Saud sideways. He was devout it was true. He prayed, fasted, and gave alms as should every good Moslem. He neither drank wine nor smoked nor used unseemly oaths. His private