

Chapter Three

Uvani and Abdul Latif

It will be easier to visualize Uvani and Abdul Latif -- to put them in the order in which they came to me -- if I give brief outlines of their lives, and try to give some idea of their personalities, through what they have said or written themselves.

The summary of Uvani's life was necessarily given to me by him alone, for he is not known to history; and I produce it here as he told it to me. Abdul Latif, on the other hand, was widely known when on earth, and he has been a familiar figure to scholars of his period ever since. The outline of his life, therefore, was not hard to obtain from reference books, with a little patience and effort, and ~~that~~ can be dated with accuracy.

Uvani, when writing through me, often digressed to give me details of his past life. His real name was Yusuf ibn Hafiq ibn Ali, and he was a member of a well-known family of Basrah, interested in the growing, marketing and export of fruit and grain. As a soldier he had been killed in the early part of the nineteenth century, aged about forty-eight, when fighting against the Turks. His father, Hafiq, had been born in Persia, and his mother came from Libya. It was she who gave him the nickname "U^opowani" -- Son of Happiness" -- which remained with him from then on, though she died while he was still a young man.

He said he was born in what he described as a small place, Ahwaz, in the Arabistan province of Persia. After living there for some years, his family had moved to Basrah. It was from there that they exported dates and melons, and they also sold quantities of these, together with prickly pears, in the local market. Barley and millet were other things they dealt in, and they were, he told me, very well off.

He once perplexed me by saying that his father was a Persian, though Uvani himself always described himself as an Arab; but he explained that, although his father had indeed been born in Persia, it was in a province principally occupied by Arabs, and it was with the Arabs that Uvani engaged in frequent skirmishes with the Turks. As he put it: "I was a soldier and was killed in warfare. Between the Turks and the Arabs there were constant feuds, needing little to spark off fire and consequent war to a finish. Many times have I fought against them, and they were, like ourselves, intrepid fighters and mighty horsemen. How vast the store-house which fills the bygone days! I feel the years intervening are those which have made short history, for, when within your sphere, I view them as a flash, the earth life becoming again that which was long. Just at times I look back through the years, reverting to that which is past."

I asked him if he was deliberately remaining where he was, and he replied: "I have been to the higher states and, when there, I am perhaps removed from what I was and am; but I steadfastly continue in this state