

Chapter VIII

It was 1934. Bill's regiment was now in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, and he was due for some leave, which he had decided to use travelling across the still partly unexplored South Libyan Desert between the Sudan and the Tibesti Mountains, in what was then called French Equatorial Africa. He planned to avoid the great heat by setting off in April from Kuttum, in north-west Darfur province, taking with him a Sudanese servant, four Sudanese camelmen and eight camels; and I knew that once he had left the Sudan it was most unlikely that he would be able to send me anything more than the scantiest news until his return weeks later.

Planning for the expedition took him all the previous winter. The officials of the Sudanese Government were helpful with permits and advice; the officers of the Camel Corps at El Obeid helped him on his way to Darfur; and there the District Commissioner, Mr. Moore, and his assistant, Wilfrid Thesiger (who was later to make an international name for himself as an explorer) were invaluable in selecting camels and trustworthy camelmen to form Bill's "hamla". Only the French authorities in Cairo were hesitant. Much of Bill's projected route lay across little visited country, ominously labelled either "Régions plates et sablonneuses sans eau ni pâturages permanentes à chameaux", or simply "Terrain inconnu", and the bureaucrats were clearly out to avoid possible trouble. Finally, however, reluctant permission was given and a visa was issued, carefully terminating with the warning "...à ses risques et périls", which they no doubt hoped would exonerate them in case of disaster.

Bill left Khartoum for El Obeid on April 1st, 1934, and thence travelled for three days by Camel Corps lorry across the sands -- there were no roads at that time -- to El Fasher, the capital of Darfur; and finally on to the north-west border hamlet of Kuttum, where for some time past Wilfred Thesiger had kindly been collecting his camels and men

together. From Kuttum Bill headed north-west out into the desert with his servant, four camelmen and eight camels, on a journey which lasted seven weeks and covered more than one thousand miles of desert towards Tibesti and then south to Abesher, in French Equatorial Africa. At Abesher he paid off his camels and returned to El Obeid, a distance of eleven hundred and fifty miles as the crow flies, in the company of two French Colonial Army officers, on top of an odoriferous lorry belonging to an itinerant Greek merchant, who happened to be going that way. Bill had been forced to turn south when nearing Tibesti, owing partly to water shortage and partly to the fear of overstaying his leave; but he completed a compass traverse of his route and discovered an extensive area of palaeolithic culture, with rock paintings of animals and hunting scenes, in the Ennedi massif, dating possibly to 5,000 B.C., hitherto unknown and unsuspected so far south in the desert.

Had it not been that I always heard about him, I should have been in a state of continual anxiety; but steadily, faithfully, news was given me in addition to the little pictures of his doings, and, although sometimes I had a terrible fear that he might be lost in the desert or unable to find water, always the fear was taken away.

April 3rd, 1934.

2.47 p.m.

Uvani.

"I am endeavouring to catch the vision of the young boy as you write. The picture comes thus: the boy sitting within an apartment with three men. Very spacious is it, but sparse in its furnishings. There is not much which makes for western comfort. I deem it, Madame, a room more used for the conduct of business. With the boy are three men all engaged in talk -- not upon one subject. I see that all manner of ideas come readily to their minds, and while talk proceeds do they have refreshments. Also they indulge in smoke.

"The boy Billy purposes this journey, and these men are in all manner of ways lending their aid. He goes well equipped. Like his brother, these journeyings give satisfaction to his heart. No son of your lord, their father, could live a life of dull repose. This, being a woman who

was born to be a mother of true men, you will understand; and your reward, Madame, is great, for they have much love for you, therefore are you indeed united.

"Billy is quite sure of his going, calm, resolute. We will do well, and in his going be protected. I have said."

Bill says to this: "This is a good picture. I was in El Obeid on April 3rd, and that evening dined at the Camel Corps Officers' Mess. We were a long way from the comforts of civilization and the building, though large, was fairly spartan in its furnishings. Uvani seems to have seen us when I was discussing my journey with the Commanding Officer, ^{Hugh} ~~Frank~~ (Major John E.H.) Bowstead, and a couple of other officers after the meal was over, in which case he was an hour or two ahead of time."

April 8th, 1934.

4.20 p.m.

Uvani.

"Behold, I will now give you that which I see concerning the young boy. Truly do his present wanderings carry me back to my earth life -- desert winds, desert sands, the long travelling. I see before me this scene. It comes clear. Billy sitting upon a camel, as one who is well accustomed to the manner of going, so sure he is. There is, upon another camel, a man who is appointed guide. He too rides. Then, upon yet another, is a man who has charge of that which appertains to the feeding of the boy, and who is a servant. I see sundry others. There are several animals, a retinue.

"The boy is quite well, very happy. All that he does is bringing him deep satisfaction. He too derives his happiness from travelling the unbeaten track. I will give constant word. Frank said he brings a picture to-morrow; Abdul Latif and your lord the days following."

Billy says: "This is one day early. We left Kuttum at 4 p.m. on Monday 4th April, to make only a short first march to let us test for any shortcomings before we had gone too far. I had with me a guide, on his camel, whom I had engaged in Kuttum, as he said he had travelled that stretch

of desert before and could find the wells for the next few days. There was Tom, the Sudanese, who was to be my body-servant in charge of my food and other things; and, of course, my four camelmen, of whom Hussein, the leader, was usually mounted. Our practice was to march in single file, as that suited the camels; and we ourselves would most often go on foot, well wrapped up, for the three or four bitterly cold hours before dawn, mounting when the sun rose and the temperature soared into the hundreds. This seems a good picture."

April 9th, 1934.

10.52 a.m.

Frank.

"I am watching Billy now. It must seem strange, in a way, to you, but of course you too are well accustomed to this sort of thing by now. Anyway, this is what I see. A great, enormous stretch of sand everywhere, and hardly anything else to be seen but Bill and a small company of men and beasts, the latter camels. He is riding along and feeling quite cheerful. He has with him, on his right hand side, a man who, I imagine, is a guide, and he is talking to him and apparently quite interested. The remainder of the party are following behind, all animatedly talking, but at a little distance, so as not to disturb Billy. He will be quite safe and sound, so don't have any fears about him. All of us will take care of your boy."

Bill's comments are: "This picture seems correct, but insufficiently detailed to enable me to fix the date. On the 9th and 10th we were crossing flat, gravelly desert, with large patches of sand, and low hills dotted with occasional patches of camel thorn. The guide would be leading, heading for the next well, perhaps two or three days distant, and the rest of the hamla would be following in single file. I sometimes rode with the guide during daylight hours. Our marching speed averaged a little over $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles an hour for 10 to 11 hours a day, giving us a distance gained of between 30 and 40 miles a day, varying, of course, according to the terrain."

April 11th, 1934.

10.59 a.m.

Abdul Latif.

"The boy Billy also is clear. He is not moving. They are resting.

He has made a place in which he reclines with ease. There are signs of movement around him. Men are preparing a meal. The animals are at some distance from him -- a scene of peace. The place which the boy now has reached is green, therefore is it oasis -- pleasant to have come to so goodly a spot. It gives great delight, Madame, when, wearied by the sight of a continuous sea of sand, such beautiful places are found. There is great rejoicing, water tasting delicious, and rest to both body and eye. Now have no worries about your boy. It is but slight glimpses which are given, yet do you know full well that we who love you can give protection unto these, the sons you love, and you."

Billy writes: "On Wednesday April 11th we were crossing a vast, sandy plain, and would continue to do so for many hours. There was no greenery and little rest. I have a feeling that Abdul Latif must have been seeing us at the wells called Umm Burru, which we were to reach two days later. There, for the first time, we were to find thorn trees and some greenery, a very welcome change after all that dryness. Once unloaded, our camels were allowed to graze on the sparse camel thorn near the well, before being collected and dropped in a circle around us and our two fires for the night. We had no tents or shelter, but just slept on the ground, as we were. We prepared food only once a day, in the evening, after finishing the day's work; and we would be on the march again by 3 a.m. The thorn trees in the depression where the well was, and the fresh water -- our first for two days -- gave us a feeling of well-being, and Abdul Latif may have gleaned his impression of beauty from this, because the place was no story-book oasis. But all impressions of comfort are comparative."

April 14th, 1934.

12.14 p.m.

H.A.K.

"Billy is at present at a place which is quite big. There are lots of people and a number of little shops. He is sitting with about half a dozen men, and they are dressed in uniform, all talking, and with bottles and glasses beside them. Billy has all sorts of things he wants to know and which he is being given information about. I want to see what these

men are like, whether I can give you some quite clear details. There is one thing I can see which stands out. I have noticed that two of them are very old. They are, none the less, dressed in uniform, but they are decrepit and much bent. Then, one of the younger men has a deep scar on his face, which runs the entire length of his cheek. He looks fairly elderly too. The others seem quite young.

"Now let me see something more. There are palm trees and sand. I see the sun is hot. The old boy is quite well. These details are also right. I hope time is."

Billy says: "This can only be Fada, which we reached on April 23rd. A lovely oasis (the only lovely one I saw), crouched under a rocky hill, with a small blue lake, palm trees, real grass near the water, and a scatter of little reed huts, some of which served as shops. Our haven that day was the French fort, a real Beau Geste affair, garrisoned by colonial troops, with white N.C.Os and officers, some of whom were bearded and may well have appeared older than they were. But the bent and ancient ones seen by Dad are possibly the water-carriers, aged camp-followers dressed in discarded uniform jackets. I cannot recall the scar; but, as the officers and N.C.Os were all long service soldiers, it is very probable that one was marked."

April 15th, 1934. 5.36 p.m.

Uvani.

"The young boy. I see him, and begin by saying: 'Be at peace.' There is nought affecting his health. He is now once more upon the desert. Familiar is it, in its dark, velvety night, to Uvani. Almost could I find that the many years which have elapsed since my earth life finished have never been, for I view him doing what I so many times have done. He is still upon his beast. The little ~~calavade~~ ^{cavalcade} -- I see them slowly journeying, and the air seems sweet. Night has just fallen, the sun having so short a period past been high in the heavens, and the blessed cool is even now gratefully striking upon them. They will journey some distance further, they having an objective."

There came a pause, and I asked Uvani if he had finished.

"I have two little details. One, that there was slight trouble, a camel having come to disaster. It was quickly remedied, but caused delay. Two, the man who acts as guide is worthy. He seeks to shield the boy from inconvenience. I have perceived, therefore have no alarm."

Bill says: "This day, April 15th, we were still crossing open desert, many marches away from the Oasis of Fada. But that morning we had reached the wells called Furawia, where I encountered an excellent man of the Beni Zirghawi, Sinein Hussein by name, mounted on a fast camel and armed with a sword and five spears. The Beni Zirghawi are great raiders -- the Pathans of the desert. Questioned, he told me that he had lost a camel a year before, near the Ennedi, and was on his way to find it. He said he would recognize it all right, if it were there, and he agreed to join us and guide us to Fada, which lay roughly on his route. But he had come far; his camel's hump was small; it would take time to water properly; and he would follow to join us during the night. We ourselves moved off at 4.20 p.m. in the comparative cool of the evening, and camped some ten miles on to the north-west, not long after sunset. Uvani must have seen us shortly before we made camp. Sinein joined us just before dawn, and was to prove a useful addition to the hamla."

April 18th, 1934. 9.50 a.m.

H.A.K.

"I see a different sight here. A cloudless sky, very hot and seemingly no breath of wind. Billy riding along, his little party with him. He is quite happy, no sense of loneliness. All these things I can feel quite clearly. It is always like looking at a picture when I get these glimpses, but a number of emotions come to me as well. There is nothing to be seen, only desert; but somehow I feel a beauty about it, it is so fascinating in its peace. Again I get this, I think from Billy: he is so contented.

"There seems to be some place he should soon be striking, where they will find water, and where they will rest. Billy has been journeying for

some considerable time, and he is looking forward to it. He talks to a man who rides near him, and has been giving him some instructions, for I see this man give a respectful salute and go back to a man who is riding behind. I wish I could tell you so much. Anyway, I know he is well."

Bill comments: "For some days we had been crossing an arid, undulating plain, with nothing to see but hills some days' march away to the north, and occasional wild ostrich and gazelles. We reached the hills, the Ennedi massif, at noon this day, April 18th, and Sinein Hussein guided us to an ancient well of sweet water hidden in the shadow of cliffs, and invisible if one had not known where to find it. The sky was clear, the sun very hot; but there was a strong northerly wind with driving sand, which made for bad travelling, and we were glad to reach water. My diary for these days says: 'I find this solitary life most invigorating and sharpening to the senses, but there is no doubt it tends rather to bring out the primitive side than otherwise. Apart from this, the feeling of detachment it gives one from all the vanities and hypocrisies of our western life is very delightful. One gets such a bird's eye view of the whole show, and the greater part of our worries and struggles seem so pointless.' Apart from the matter of the wind, this is a good picture."

April 27th, 1934. 6.25 p.m.

Uvani.

"Shall I now give you a seeing for Billy? I have been taking notes. I think the hour is yours.

"A large fire; the darkness falling; much vast stretches of sand; no green to be seen. They are encamped, and the scene is peaceful. A line of camels lying. There are, clustered round yet another blaze, men intent on making ready that which shall stay hunger. By the other fire reclines Billy, satisfied, for he has been given already to eat. He is content, the day's work affording him satisfaction, plenty of exercise, the feeling that achievement is his, and that at close of day he has the sweetness of rest which his endeavours have won. He has beside him his gun. This he keeps ever beside him. Have no qualms, no doubts, for all moves serenely. Your

boy is safe."

Then, when writing for me a few moments later, not in Billy's book, Uvani added: "Make note that it is, we are sure, a picture which will be verified correctly, for I have felt the sight was surpassing clear. Now, having given, I leave you."

Billy's comments on this are: "This is a good description of our camp at night, but it might be at any of a score of sites. A new and perfectly correct item is Uvani noting that I had a gun with me and that I always slept with it beside me."

April 29th, 1934. 11.50 p.m. Uvani.

"Madame, I would tell you this: the boy Billy, these few hours since, reached a green, fertile spot. Here he is resting at the time I write, cloaked in the mantle of sleep. He lies within, sheltered by a small tent. The servant lyeth near him, and, at a small distance, are stretched the remainder of the company. All is full of peace, the night is still. I see that the journey is progressing favourably and that contentment reigns. All goes well with the boy. I leave you with blessings. Uvani."

Billy remarks: "This night we were at Toukou wells, surrounded by hills with shallow caves in them, their roofs covered with palaeolithic paintings of hunting scenes. There was some greenery near the wells, and we did have a small tent with us; but I cannot remember ever having had it erected."

May 5th, 1934. 12.50 a.m. Uvani.

"Now I have, while speaking unto you, Madame, been viewing the young boy. He does this, at the time at which I see him: he sits, and, aided by his servant, is engaged in making afresh his toilet. Very hot, very toil-worn is the boy. He has removed his soiled garments, and, gratefully having refreshed his limbs with jets of water which have been poured upon him, is now placing fresh garments upon himself. The feeling is pleasant. When he is once more dressed he purposes sleeping, the midday sun being still at its height; and he will not proceed. He is now at a green and and very lovely spot where he will remain some short period. His servant

is getting food, a light repast, and bringing it unto the boy."

There was a pause, and Uvani went on: "I am trying to see the rest of his small company. They are there, not far removed, sitting with their camels, which are tethered nearby. All is peace. I beg you to be happy."

Bill says: "This picture is ten days late. During our journeyings there was only one occasion on which (a) we came upon a site such as Uvani describes; (b) halted under the midday sun and went no further; and (c) bathed. It was a remarkable canyon deep in the Ennedi massif, called Archei, where once -- perhaps many thousands of years ago -- there must have been a very considerable body of water, judging by the successive shore-lines down the canyon walls. But now what we were looking at were the last remnants -- a series of still, clear pools, each some 40 to 50 yards long, full of delightful little fish nestling under vast boulders. Palm trees, flowering oleanders, reeds and thick foliage of all sorts covered the floor of the canyon, stretching out to the end, where a large pool of black water, full of camel droppings, showed where previous hamlas had watered their beasts. In the upper pools I even saw a diminutive crocodile, a quite remarkable sight in the midst of such a desert. I wanted to photograph it, but it shuffled nervously off into the water as I approached. We watered our camels at the lowest pool, and then drew clear water for ourselves from the upper, and bathed for the first time in weeks. Our march that morning, starting well before dawn, had brought us nearly thirty miles in scorching heat, and we had done most of it on foot, due to the broken nature of the ground through the mountains. So, when Uvani describes us as toil-worn, it's no exaggeration."

May 9th, 1934.

5.47 p.m.

Uvani.

"The young boy is still upon his way. He has been carrying out this journey across the vast desert with unabated interest, never daunted."

Uvani stopped writing, and I asked if he were looking to see what Billy was doing.

"As I spoke I did but get a general sense of his well-being, knowing

he still progressed. Now, however, see with my eyes.

"The boy is in his tent. He is reclining. A short while since he slept. Now he has awakened and there are preparations, for presently he will again commence his wanderings. All around lies the great, wide stretch of desert. When I view him I can smell the sweetness of the desert air, so vividly does it recall my life. How often have I too ridden across its great tracts! And now I can see what lies beside the boy -- a trophy, which looks like some wild beast which has been slain."

"Where, Uvani? Not beside him actually?"

"It is not far removed. I see that he has pride, in that he, with his own hands, did slay it. All this can I feel. The boy is so pleased."

Billy writes: "This must be Thursday, May 5th. We had come a long way, when, shortly after dawn, we saw a herd of Addra gazelles. I took Hussein and Mohammed, two of my camelmen, with me to try to get one. Stalking in open desert requires great cunning, and our chase was long and tiring, but finally I managed to shoot one of the large bucks, which we gutted on the spot, and then took it in turns to carry to rejoin the hamla, which had moved on a long way from where we had left it.

"When Uvani saw us we were evidently at our midday halt. We were very glad to have the meat, being short of food -- and water, too -- just then, and badly in need of anything we could get.

"The mention of the tent, once more, disturbs me. I am sure we never bothered to erect it. I might, however, have been lying in the shade of it, rolled up on the ground. It and the poles made quite a bundle; a good half camel-load."

May 15th, 1934.

9.35 p.m.

Abdul Latif.

"Your young boy, Billy, is now seated. There are others, beside the men who are employed by him, and they appear to be men whom he has come across, and to whom he offers food. I see four beside the boy. They are not of native origin, but are like himself. I see one is old in years

when compared with Billy -- well experienced. The others vary. They all appear to be very cheerful, friendly and pleasant.

"Your boy is speaking. I gather he has recounted the history of his wanderings and is now being listened to with interest. They are, I should, hasten to inform you, in a large room. It is most comfortable, well equipped, and the boy will be housed therein, given a room in which he will have a sleeping couch. This will be luxury."

"Abdul Latif, does he seem just to have arrived there?"

"To me does it seem that he has recently arrived, for there is surrounding all an air of interest, as if they were being made acquainted anew."

Bill says: "The description given here by Abdul Latif refers not to Tuesday, May 15th, but to two days earlier, Sunday the 13th, when I had just arrived back at El Fasher, the capital of Darfur, and been invited by the Governor of the province, Mr. Dupuis, to his house. It was not I who was offering food, therefore, but he. We had met, of course, several weeks earlier, when I was on my way west. With me were Haig, the Acting District Commissioner, who was an old Cambridge friend, and Capitaines Ravel and Chalmel, the two French Colonial Army officers who had joined me in the Equatorial, and who were on their way home on leave via Khartoum.

"There were thus five of us at table, as described. The older, more experienced man would be Dupuis, the Governor. A slight inaccuracy is that I was put up for the night by Haig, and not by Dupuis.

"Abdul Latif remarks that I would be sleeping on a couch, in luxury. Well he might! After weeks of lying on the bare ground it came as a pleasant change; but annoyingly the bed proved too soft after what I was now used to, and I slept badly. I believe others have experienced the same thing."

May 16th, 1934.

9.52 p.m.

Frank.

"Allie, this is what I see. The picture is very clear. There are four white men. I see Billy standing talking. He is dressed in khaki

shorts and a shirt with open front, and he has on long stockings, rolled below the knee. It is late. He seems to be on the point of setting off, as if he were just with these men for a short time. The place where he is has some buildings -- quite a number -- and there appears to be a little community there. I can see all Billy's people and his camels all ready waiting for him. He has had a meal, and is evidently going to travel at night. He is saying he wants to push on, and I see him getting various oddments in the way of food, which are being stowed away by his servant. It is perfectly clear. I see he is well and also happy. I want you to feel completely easy about him." There came a pause.

"Any more, Fanter?"

"Not any more, because I have lost the picture."

Bill's comments are: "This is Biltine, the second French Colonial Army fort at which we stopped. We got there on Saturday evening, the 5th May, and left again the following evening before dark, the only occasion on which we did so from a 'community', so the date is certain; but time has slipped, and Frank is ten days late. Apart from this he has seen well. The description of my dress is very good."

May 20th, 1934.

10.35 a.m.

Uvani.

"How does our young boy comport himself? Thus: he is now journeying."

"In what way, Uvani?"

"At present he is not seated, as has been his wont, on a camel. This is the scene: a hot sun; very much dust; most trying is the whole proceeding, for the boy is in a rough contrivance, which is being propelled by the same method as are motor vehicles which he often uses. The contrivance is not of the same luxurious design. It is roughly hewn, large, containing much. People are within it, also baggage, and there is no shade. It is of the type of carts, but useful in that it saves many miles of toil. The boy is getting now, from out a box, some garment. This he uses as a further protection, placing it upon the bench whereon he is seated. He has turned and spoken to the servitor. I see him also. There are five men."

Uvani stopped writing, and I asked: "Can you see any more?"

"He is well, and happy in his achievement. Now he comes to you. The boy's thoughts are with the homeward journey. Madame, I have no more."

Billy says: "This is a description of the Greek trader's lorry in which my two French officer friends and I travelled from Abesher to El Obeid, from May 11th to 16th inclusive. The picture is therefore at least four days late, and could be as much as ten. The lorry was piled high with merchandise of every description including, unfortunately, a number of four-gallon tins of evil-smelling cooking oil, which leaked over our kit and everything else. Counting the Greek, there were five of us, just as Uvani says. The two French officers and Tom, my servant, who was still with me, travelled mostly on top of the cargo at the back, where they could stretch out, while I usually rode in front, in the cab with the Greek, to stop him falling asleep and ditching us. We drove for six long, uncomfortable days and nights, fourteen to fifteen hours a day, baked by the sun, short of sleep, covered in dust and earnestly praying for it all to end. There were no roads in that part of Africa in those days, only camel tracks through the thorn brush and sand, into which we sank axle-deep too often for words, having each time to dismount, unload, dig and push the vehicle out of the deep drifts. How the Greek would have fared had he not had us as an unpaid working party, defeats the imagination. He'd be there still, being eaten by hyenas or lions, of which we saw a large number.

"Uvani is right when he says 'most trying is the whole proceeding'. He read my thoughts that time! I would much rather have finished the journey with my dear camels; but time had run short and, in Abesher, the Greek and his lorry had seemed a good solution. Better had we heeded the warning: 'Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes'. Not that the trip was a free gift. He charged us five hundred francs a head for our discomfort!"

May 22nd, 1934.

2.0 p.m.

Uvani.

"Take swiftly the small seeing. Your young boy is safe, he is well, he is happy, once more within the abode whence he made his preparations. He is back."

"Do you know when he arrived, Uvani?"

"To me does it seem that he arrived but some few hours since, for there is much commotion within the apartment. There sundry unpackings, friends who enter, and the exchange of words seems endless. The boy now sits, relating unto his young friends that which has happened, and he affords them envy. I see he purposes immediate departure."

"Absolutely immediate, Uvani?"

"To me it appears so. There is no air of repose. He will again be shortly starting on his way. He is now seen talking to a third man, who, having entered, causes all three young men to rise. This man is one who commands respect, therefore do the boys accord it. Madame, I can also see he has brought written paper. This he gives the boy Billy."

Billy's remarks are: "I had, in fact, arrived back in Khartoum on May 19th, to rejoin my Regiment, and Uvani's description of the first few hours is a good one. The Adjutant came later to hear the news and to give me a copy of an order posting me to Cyprus at the end of my leave. This was a complete surprise, and may be the paper which Uvani mentions. The days up to my departure on May 22nd were hectic with preparations, because I had never imagined, when I set off into the desert, that I would not continue to serve in the Sudan; and now I had little time in which to sell off my polo ponies and other possessions before leaving for good. Uvani seems to have caught a general picture of those days, including the urgency of 'immediate departure' on the 22nd. My train left late that morning."

May 24th, 1934.

9.45 p.m.

Uvani.

"Uvani, I wish I could have a picture of Billy."

"Will you? I strive to see. Then bring to Uvani your young boy's book. You will see what I see. He is within a train, which bears him with

extreme speed, and, before many days have come to their end, you will be reunited. He is still within the land which is familiar to Uvani."

There was a pause, and I said: "Yes, Uvani?"

"The carriage which is -- you understand, Madame -- his for the time being, is, save for one other, given over to the boy. He has much which belongs to him within. He will shortly be asleep, for the hour is late. Now you must not be anxious, nor with any apprehension, for all is well."

Bill says to this: "I left the train from Khartoum at Wadi Halfa, on the evening of May 23rd, and travelled down the Nile on a river steamer to Assouan, arriving there on the 25th to take another train to Cairo, one to Alexandria, and a boat to Genoa. The journey from Khartoum to Cairo, in those days, took all of four days and nights, including the two nights on the river steamer.

"Uvani's picture is accurate, but 24 hours early, and refers to the train journey from Assouan. We boarded the train in the late afternoon, and, as I was short of cash, I didn't take a sleeper but an ordinary compartment, into which I and a planter friend from the Gesira barricaded ourselves for the night with mountains of luggage -- not a difficult thing to do, as of course I had all my worldly possessions with me, and he had plenty too. This ensured us room to stretch out for the night."

May 26th, 1934.

4.30 p.m.

Abdul Latif.

"The boy Billy is now, with many others, alighting from the steam train. He is about to get into a large conveyance. He will journey in this to a dwelling, but within this place he will not remain long, for he is about to make further peregrination. He will be this time in a vessel -- not for long, for shortly he will again, placing himself in a steam train, draw near home.

"I see him now. He stands surrounded by natives who are talking. Wildly excited, chattering and moving rapidly, they seize upon the goods which lie around. The boy now moves, I see him enter a motor. He is seated beside two men having garments like unto his own. They are, however, advanced in years. I see too the place is large."

From Billy: "Our boat train from Cairo arrived at Alexandria at 12.30 p.m. on May 26th. The Lloyd-Triestino vessel which was to take us to Genoa was alongside the quay, due to sail at 2 p.m., so we went straight aboard. Only later, while I was unpacking, did I suddenly remember, with a pang of dismay, that my two heavy trunks had been registered through from Khartoum, and must now be awaiting me at the railway terminus in the centre of the town. I dashed ashore, and, seizing a Thomas Cook's man, explained the gravity of the situation. He, noble fellow, rallied at once, and, hailing a taxi, we raced off. After innumerable encounters with dim-witted authorities, and arguments with the Customs, we finally got the trunks released and arrived back in board with them just as the ship's siren was blowing for departure, amidst the usual hubbub of chattering, gesticulating porters, importunate sellers of filthy pictures, sightseers and gulligulli men that seems inseparable from any ship departure from Port Said or Alexandria. I think Abdul Latif has captured the confusion well."

May 26th, 1934.

9.26 p.m.

H.A.K.

"As you asked me, my mind went out to our boy. I longed to see for you. This is what happened. I saw the usual cameo. Billy was in the picture. He is in a small ship. It is smaller than the usual sort that he has been going in. It looks not much larger than a yacht. He is walking up and down the deck. There are several people near him. The boat is going along quietly. There doesn't appear to be any motion. He feels well and he is all right, cheerful and happy."

Billy says: "This must refer to the Nile steamer, which I was in from Wednesday, May 23rd, to the morning of the 25th. Dad is clearly contrasting it with the liners I was seen on in Bombay harbour and the troopship on which we sailed to Port Sudan in December. The boat was the S.R. IBIS, a stern-wheel paddle steamer of about 120 foot waterline, and crowded with passengers. There had been so many on the train at Wadi Halfa that two boats had been required to take us all. The river, which is about a mile wide on that stretch, was as calm as a mill-pond all the way to Assouan."

May 29th, 1934.

6.30 p.m.

Uvani.

"I have seen this. There is a place at which the boy Billy, having travelled many hours by rail, alighted. There were many with him, all intent on the pursuit similar to that on which he was intent. They diligently sought for those garments which had, for the purpose of travelling, been laid within receptacles, and there was infinite confusion. I saw the boy seize first on one article and then upon another which belonged to him, and, having thus extricated them, bade one who attended to carry them. This having been done did one in high authority pass sentence, saying that what was before him was of merit and might proceed. Then the boy was also permitted to accompany his belongings, and was taken to where another train awaited him. There was much talk and much noise, Madame."

"Uvani, do you think all this happened a short time ago?"

"Knowing you would be coming to talk with me, I strove to see. It seemed, Madame, to take place as I came."

"Thank you very much, Uvani. Have you finished?"

"All but a small matter, and that is that Billy had, before stepping within the train again, stopped to purchase viands."

About this, Bill remarks: "Our boat docked at Genoa early in the morning of May 30th, so, although I had certainly been travelling many hours, it had been by sea and not by rail, and Uvani is about ~~twelve~~ hours ahead of time. I disembarked and went through Customs, which Uvani describes with eloquence. I then boarded the Paris express amidst all the din, shouting and gesticulations of an Italian railway station, and found for myself one of those curious half-compartments that there used to be at the end of continental coaches, and which I was able to keep all to myself. There was a restaurant car on the train; but, while I sat waiting for the train to start, a persuasive vendor of lunch baskets came down the platform hawking his wares, and I fell to his blandishments. Luckily too, for the contents were delicious. A container of hot spaghetti in sauce, half a

hot roast chicken with potatoes and salad, bread, butter, cheese, fruit and half a bottle of good wine -- what more could one want? And all for the equivalent of two shillings, or 10p!

"Apart from that one point, this is an accurate picture."

The last letter I had had from Bill had been written from El Fasher, in the Sudan, and posted from there on April 8th, and I did not hear from him again until I got a cable, sent on May 11th, from Abesher in French Equatorial Africa, in which he said that he hoped to be home with us in England on May 30th. No more news came after that, except in pictures, and, when the appointed day arrived, I confidently expected Bill to appear, or at all events to receive a telegram; but the afternoon came and still there was no message. A dread feeling of anxiety came over me, and I was wracked with fears that he might still be somewhere in the desert, and that perhaps everything I had been hearing about him was wrong. Then, almost directly, I was made calm again, for clearly, decisively, my hand moved: it was Harry telling me not to be frightened; that all was well; and that very soon I should have Billy with me again. Immediately following that, word came from Uvani.

May 30th, 1934.

2.10 p.m.

Uvani.

"Madame, in that you have feelings of anxiety about the non-arrival of your boy, I should wish to give you every reassurance. I will again picture. Do not grow troubled. I can tell you somewhat concerning the young boy. What you have been steadily given is correct. He is indeed fast approaching you. Ere long you will all be reunited. That he has not sent you further word is explained in this wise: has he not already announced unto you his arrival?"

I said: "Yes, Uvani, and now I think his idea must be to send me word when he knows the exact time of his arrival."

"That is so. He also says: 'I know my mother will be kept informed.'"

He furthermore says this: 'I know my mother has supreme faith.'"

Uvani stopped, and I asked: "Does it now seem to you that I haven't?"

"Do I not well understand? Great is your faith; great your knowledge; great your understanding." Uvani stopped again, as though he were considering. "But, when waiting for confirmation of that which we have given, do these thoughts come: 'It may be that the words in which I have been told the doings of my well-loved boy have perchance gone astray.'"

"That is what I have been wondering; whether, by any chance, they can be wrong."

"But you will continue please, Madame, strong. I swear to you -- I, Uvani, who for so long time have brought all counsel to you -- that truth has been observed. Your lord (he whose love has, ever since he left you, overcome all obstacles), has also spoken truly; Abdul Iatif also, and also Frank. Now the boy still journeys. This I plainly see.

"He is within the train. He has been many hours within these conveyances, all bearing him on his way, and I think the time swiftly approaches when he will land upon your shores. It may be that he will still continue for the space of some hours. I am unable clearly to know."

"Uvani, the main thing is to know he is coming, and that he is all right."

"He is well, I assure you; robust, full of vigour. He is content and happy. He is rapidly borne upon his way and his thoughts go out to you. I am taking note of what lies within his immediate vicinity."

Nothing happened for a couple of minutes, and I asked: "Is it hard to see?"

"Why should it sometimes be harder, Madame? This is what happens. I look, and like a picture mirrored in clear crystal do all details show. Then, upon another occasion do I attempt to see, and my vision becomes as it were blurred. Then do I give what is difficult to make clear to the boy, so great the difference in my portrayal."

"Is it blurred now?"

"It is not clear. I do, however, visualise this: a crowded interior, many seated side by side; the boy idly reclining, not in posture of lying, but leaning against the cushions, his legs outstretched; and many there

are with him. There is also perpetual movement as people walk beside the apartment, seeking first one thing and then another. The boy himself has risen and gone without, and walks along a narrow corridor, thus affording a limited amount of freedom. The journey is somewhat wearisome. I am pleased you will so soon have him restored unto you."

Bill says: "When Uvani gave this picture I was in my second-class half-compartment, not having money enough to afford a sleeper, and the train would have been passing through the Alps to the French frontier, which we reached at 5 p.m. that afternoon. As Uvani says, I was easy in my mind that Mother would not be unduly bothered at my arriving a day late, and I would be able to announce my arrival by a telegram from Paris the next morning. All the way from Genoa I had managed to keep my half-compartment to myself, and so was able to stretch out during the night and sleep, although the train was fairly crowded. When Uvani says 'and many there are with him', this clearly refers to the carriage as a whole, or I should not have been able to recline as he describes. We reached Paris at 6 a.m. on May 31st. I sent off a telegram to Mother and then took the Calais train from the Gare du Nord. That time the train really was crowded, and we sat jammed like sardines all the way."

That same night, Harry wrote: "You will hear from Bill the first thing to-morrow morning"; and, very early, while I was still abed, a telegram arrived from Paris to say he would be with us in the afternoon. Ronald and I met him at Victoria, safe and sound and none the worse for his adventures. For five weeks I had both my boys with me again, and there were no more pictures until Bill's departure for Cyprus, at the end of his home leave.

When Uvani, more than two years later, was speaking to me through Eileen Garrett, he mentioned that Bill's expedition had gone for some days in the desert without water, and the suffering that I should have gone through had I known about this at the time. There was nothing in the pictures to show what happened; but the dread of this thing had been

constantly in my mind. I asked Bill to write the story for me, and this is what he says:

"The wells at Toukou were deserted now by all but scorpions and enormous wolf spiders, crouching from the heat in the shade of the caves with the rock paintings. The next well was five long marches to the south, as much as the camels could be expected to do in their present condition. We filled every water-tank to the brim, and the next dawn found us already far on our way, with the Ennedi massif fast disappearing over the horizon behind us.

"There was nothing to see ahead except sand and a shimmering heat haze; not even the horizon, for sky and land merged imperceptibly into one another. There was no noise but the soft padding of the camels and the clank,clank, clank of the tanks bumping against their sides. By day the heat was blistering. Mirages were plentiful and the wind, blowing steadily from in front, drove the fine particles of sand into our faces in a most irritating way. Mercifully at night, which was when we covered our greatest distances, it was mostly calm and refreshingly cold, and I would walk at the head of the column, following the guide's lantern as it twinkled away in front. I had picked up this man at Fada oasis, and he preferred to march alone, for all his faculties were needed to keep direction, and any distraction might have led to unhappy consequences. There was little enough in the terrain to assist him, God knows! I thought at the time how aptly the French cartographers had described it: 'Flat, sandy regions, without water or permanent grazing for camels.' It was exact!

"For the first day and a half we hobbled the camels after unsaddling, to discourage them from returning to Toukou with its cooling waters; but, once far enough out into the shiny, they resigned themselves to the future in the fatalistic but loudly complaining manner of their kind. On the third day stones appeared on the desert surface, and the camels' pads became badly torn. One of the men cut up an empty waterskin and stitched patches onto their feet so that we could continue, but the pace was getting

slower. That evening we saw a solitary gazelle, and the next morning a low range of hills, with a single conical peak, appeared to the south, hiding the well we were making for. The sight of the hills seemed to put new life into the camels, and we began to move more quickly. A few thorn trees and acacias appeared. The daytime heat was over 120° in the shade, and our minds were filled with little but thoughts of water and rest. We reached the well that afternoon. It was dry.

"It was an awkward moment. For a minute or so no one spoke a word; but at length the guide turned to me and said calmly: "It is a night and half a day's journey to the next well, and the camels are weak. Who knows if there is water even there?".

"There was one small tank of water left, and I ordered two of my men to give it to the camels. They did this by filling their mouths and blowing it up the creatures' nostrils, which so enlivened them that they began to graze off the nearby thorn trees. We rested for the remainder of daylight, and broke camp as the sun was sinking. Ever since leaving the wells at Toukou we had been walking for the sake of the camels; but my riding camel was now quite hors de combat, and the rest were not much better, and although we made quite good time for the first few hours, the beasts were almost used up. During the night one of them fell and lay. We removed its load and left it to follow if it could. It was the camels which were the chief sufferers. We had been marching hard ever since leaving the oasis of Fada, and they had had no chance to regain their humps and strength. Even the men and I were tired, and I think we slept at times as we walked along, for my memory of what happened on that march is far from clear.

"Dawn found us still moving, the camels dragging their feet; but Mohammed, the guide, assured us that, if we could reach it, the well was not more than some hours distant. We went on, and, as the sun rose, I called a halt for the men to turn to Mecca and say their prayers. The last part of the march was the worst. The sun was scorching and seemed

to drain one of energy, besides adding to one's thirst. At nine o'clock we reached the wells, two deep pits, ages old, going far down; but there was water, thick, dark water, redolent of camel dung. Seldom have men and animals been more delighted to drink! After watering the camels and leaving them to graze, we drank ourselves and then lay down and slept till nightfall. We had marched fifteen hours without water, in great heat, and the camels had gone for almost six days.

"But one should not get the wrong impression from contretemps of this sort. It is not they which come to mind when one recalls one's travels. For this account I have had to refresh my memory, almost entirely, from my diary, written at the time; whereas pleasant and amusing incidents come to one's mind unasked and monopolize the recollections of one's journeys. It's a happy provision of nature that this should be so."