

The Adventures of Sinuhe

In spite of all that he had done to unite Egypt and bring peace and prosperity to her after years of civil war, Pharaoh Amen-em-het went in constant danger from plots to murder him, hatched by one great lord or another who wished to seize his throne.

Fearing lest one of these plots should prove successful, and knowing that if one of his lords tried to usurp the throne it would plunge Egypt into civil war again, Amen-em-het promoted his son Sen-Usert (whom the Greek historians called Sesostris) to be his viceroy and co-ruler, so that he should be ready to step into his place as Pharaoh immediately it became vacant, and be able to put down any rising or rebellion that might break out.

Amen-em-het's wisdom was proved ten years later when he was in fact murdered as the result of a conspiracy in the palace.

Sen-Usert was abroad at the time, leading an army against Temeh in Libya. He had defeated the enemy and was returning to Egypt with much booty and many captives, when messengers arrived by night - obviously bearing important news for the Prince.

"Sinuhe knew rather more than he should about the plot against Amen-em-het."

Among Sen-Usert's chosen body-guard of 'Royal Companions' was a young warrior called Sinuhe who knew rather more than he should about the plot against Amen-em-het. When he saw the messengers, Sinuhe guessed that they must have tidings of what had happened at Thebes, and he crept silently up to the back of the royal pavilion and stood there as if on guard. But with his dagger he made a slit in the material where it was stretched over one of the posts so that he could hear everything that was said inside.

Sinuhe heard the messengers telling Sen-Usert of his father's death, and that he was now Pharaoh. 'You must ride for Thebes at once,' they said. 'Do not tell the army what has happened, but set out immediately with only the Royal Companions. Other messengers have gone to your faithful governors throughout Egypt commanding them to hide the news of the death of Pharaoh Amen-em-het from the people until Pharaoh Sen-Usert - life, health, strength be to him! - is proclaimed in Thebes.'

When Sinuhe heard all this he was filled with fear. If he went to Memphis with Sen-Usert and the Royal Companions his part in the plot to murder Amen-em-het might be discovered; and if he asked to remain with the army he might be suspected and Sen-Usert would certainly realize that he had been spying and overheard the secret news.

Perhaps none of these things would have happened, but Sinuhe was seized with such panic that he slipped quietly out of the camp, to wait until he saw which way the army was marching. Then he crept down and made his way south along the edge of the desert, trying to avoid all towns and even villages. When he came to where the Nile begins to branch out into the many streams of the Delta he was in more danger of being seen. One man whom he met unexpectedly turned and fled, thinking that he was a bandit; and he came at evening to a district of islands and high reeds which must have been somewhere near where the modern city of Cairo now stands.

Here he found an old boat without oars or rudder, and as the wind was blowing from the west he trusted himself to it and drifted downstream towards Heliopolis, but came to the eastern bank of the Nile a mile or so outside the town.

So he continued on his way, crossing the isthmus of Suez near the Bitter Lakes and stealing by night across the frontier and into the Desert of Sinai. Here he nearly died of thirst, and indeed had given up all hope and lain down never to rise again, when he heard the lowing of cattle.

Creeping on his hands and knees, so weak was he, Sinuhe came to a camp of Asiatic nomads. The sheikh of the tribe recognized him as an Egyptian and guessed by his appearance that he

was a man of importance. So he tended him carefully, feeding him gradually with milk and water until he was strong enough to take more solid food.

After this Sinuhe came without further adventures to the ancient city of Byblos in Syria where Egyptians had always been welcome since the great temple had been built on the spot where Isis found the body of Osiris in the column of King Maltander's palace.

He dwelt there for some time, and then journeyed further east to the great valley beyond the Lebanon range where King Ammi-en-shi ruled the land which was then called Retenu. Ammi-en-shi welcomed him, saying. 'Come and dwell in my country: I have other men of Egypt who serve me, and you will at least hear your native language in this place. Moreover it seems to me that you must have been a man of some importance in Egypt: therefore, tell me why you have left your home. What news is there from the court of Pharaoh?'

Then Sinuhe said, 'Pharaoh Amen-em-het has departed to dwell beyond the horizon; he has been taken up to the place of the gods - and I fled, fearing civil war in Egypt and danger to those who had been near to Pharaoh. I left Egypt for no other reason but this: I was faithful to Pharaoh and no evil was spoken against me. Yet I think that some god must have guided me and led me hither.'

'I have had news from Egypt since you left it,' said Ammi-en-shi. 'The new Pharaoh is Sen-Usert the son of Amen-em-het. He has taken his place upon the throne of the Two Lands, he has set the Double Crown of Upper and Lower Egypt upon his head, his hands hold the scourge and the crook. There has been no rebellion yet in Egypt, but do you think that war will come?'

Sinuhe realized that Ammi-en-shi was asking his advice as to whether it was safe to rebel against the rule of Egypt and seek to make Retenu an independent country outside the Egyptian Empire, and he said: 'If Sen-Usert is now Pharaoh, and all in Egypt are faithful to him, there will be no danger of rebellion or civil war. For Sen-Usert is a god upon earth, a general without an equal. He it was who led the army against the Libyans of Temeh and subdued them victoriously. He is a Pharaoh who will extend the frontiers of Egypt's empire: he will send his

armies south into Nubia and east into Asia. Therefore my advice to you is that you send messengers to kiss the ground before him. Let him know of your loyalty, for he will not fail to do good to all lands that are true to him.'

Then King Ammi-enashi replied, 'How happy must Egypt be under so strong and great a Pharaoh! I will do even as you advise. But as for you, stay here with me and command my armies, and I will make you great.'

"He married the eldest daughter of the King and was given a palace..."

So Sinuhe prospered in the land of Retenu. He married the eldest daughter of the King and was given a palace to dwell in, upon an estate where all good things grew in abundance. There were groves of fig-trees and vineyards where grapes grew so thickly that wine was more plentiful than water; there were rich fields of barley and wheat, and pastures where the cattle grew fat. Never did Sinuhe know any shortage of roast meats, either beef or chickens from his lands, or the wild things which he hunted with his hounds on the lower slopes of Mount Lebanon.

Sinuhe did not gain all this for nothing. As commander of Ammi-enashi's army he made war on neighboring tribes and peoples who tried to invade Retenu from the north and east - and in every venture he was successful, slaying the enemy with his strong arm and unerring arrows, carrying off the inhabitants as slaves and bringing back great droves of cattle to swell the royal herds.

So King Ammi-enashi grew to love him as if he were his son, and planned to make him next in succession to the throne by right of his wife, the Princess Royal: for it seems that either the King of Retenu had no sons or else the throne descended in the female line.

Not all the people of Retenu were pleased at the idea of being ruled in days to come by a foreigner, and there was a murmur of rebellion headed by a certain champion who was the strongest man and most famous warrior in the country, and against whom no one had been able to stand in battle.

When King Ammi-enashi heard of this, he was troubled at heart and sent for Sinuhe, saying to him, 'Do you know this man? Have you any secret that he has discovered?'

And Sinuhe answered, 'My lord, I have never seen him. I have never entered his house. He comes against me out of jealousy - and, if it pleases you, I will meet him in battle. For either he is a braggart who wishes to seize both my property and my power, or else he is like a wild bull who wishes to gore the tame bull and add his cows to his own herd. Or he is simply like a bull that can bear no other bull to be thought stronger or fiercer than he is himself.'

So the duel was arranged. It was to take place before a great gathering of the people of Retenu, in the presence of the King himself.

All night Sinuhe practised with his weapons, testing his bow and sharpening his javelins. At daybreak he came to the field of battle, and the people applauded him, crying, 'Can there be any fighting man greater than Sinuhe?'

But when the champion came striding out from among his followers, they fell silent: for he was a mighty man indeed.

He began the battle, shooting at Sinuhe with his arrows, and hurling his javelins. But Sinuhe was quick of foot and quick of eye, and he dodged them all or turned them harmlessly away with his shield.

"[He] smote off his rival's head at a single blow."

Then he made ready for the champion, who came rushing on him waving a mighty battle-axe above his head. Sinuhe shot an arrow, and the champion turned it with his shield; then Sinuhe hurled a javelin so swiftly that the champion had no time to ward it off, but was struck in the

neck by it, stumbled and fell upon his face. The battle-axe flew out of his hand: Sinuhe seized hold of it and smote off his rival's head at a single blow.

All the people of Retenu cheered him, and the King caught him in his arms and embraced him, crying, 'Surely here is the worthiest man in all the land to rule with me!'

So Sinuhe became the greatest lord in Retenu after Ammi-enshi, and ruled the land with him for many years, and became King after him when he died.

But when he grew old, Sinuhe began to long for his own land, and a great desire came upon him to see Egypt once more before he died and be laid to rest at last in a rock tomb at Thebes.

Pharaoh Sen-Usert knew that the new king of Retenu was that Sinuhe who had been his Royal Companion in the days of Amen-em-het; he had sent letters to him as to a loyal subject, and Sinuhe had replied as a loyal subject should.

Now he wrote begging to be forgiven for leaving the royal service at the time of uncertainty after Amen-em-het's death, and asking if he might return to Egypt to spend his old age there.

Sen-Usert wrote back at once, bidding him come to dwell in the Royal Palace as a great lord and trusted adviser, and he ended: 'Return to Egypt to look again upon the land where you were born and the palace where you served me so faithfully in the days before Osiris took to himself my father the good god Amen-em-het. You are now growing old, you are no longer a young man bent upon adventures. Look forward to the day of your burial: do not let death come upon you far away among the Asiatics. Dwell with me in Egypt, and when that day comes you shall be laid to rest at Western Thebes in a mummy case of rich gold with your face inlaid upon it in lapis lazuli. A sledge drawn by oxen shall bring you to your tomb while the singers go in front and the dancers follow behind until you come to the door of your sepulchre. That shall be made for you in the midst of the royal tombs where princes and viziers lie; and the walls shall be painted with all the wisdom of the dead so that your Ba shall pass

safely into the Duat; and rich treasures and plentiful offerings shall be set in your tomb so that your Ka may feast upon them until the day comes when Osiris shall return to earth. Come quickly, for you grow old and you know not when some sickness may smite you down. It is not right that a noble of Egypt should be laid in the earth wrapped in a sheepskin like a mere Asiatic. Come quickly, for you have roamed too long!

Sinuhe rejoiced exceedingly when he received this letter. At once he made arrangements to hand over the rule of Retenu with all his possessions to his eldest son; and then he set out for Egypt attended by a small party of his chosen followers.

When he reached the borders of Egypt he was met by an embassy from Pharaoh who welcomed him warmly and made much of the lords of Retenu who had come with him.

At the Nile a ship was waiting for him, and Sinuhe was brought up the river in great state and comfort to the palace of Pharaoh.

When he was led into the royal presence he prostrated himself on the ground before the throne and lay as if dead.

Then Pharaoh Sen-Usert said kindly, 'Lift him up and let him speak! Sinuhe, you have arrived at your home, you have ceased to wander in foreign lands and come back in honorable old age so that when the time comes you may be laid to rest in a fine tomb at Western Thebes and not thrust into the ground by Asiatic barbarians. See, I greet you by name! Welcome, Sinuhe!'

Then Sinuhe rose and stood before Sen-Usert with down-cast eyes and said, 'Behold, I stand before you and my life is yours to do with as you will.'

Pharaoh stepped down from his throne and took Sinuhe by the hand. He led him to the Queen and said to her laughingly, 'See, here is Sinuhe, dressed like a wild Asiatic of the desert!'

Then the royal children came to greet him also, and Pharaoh uttered his decree, saying, 'I make Sinuhe a Companion of Pharaoh, a great lord of the Court. I give him such lands and riches as becomes such a one - those that he forfeited when he fled from Egypt long ago, and more than he lost, to welcome him on his return and show how happy we are to have him with us once more.'

And so Sinuhe became a great man in Egypt and a close friend of the Pharaoh from whom he had fled in a moment of panic. He gave lavish care to the carving and decorating of his tomb, and caused all the story of his adventures to be written on it, and also to be copied out and kept in the archives. And when he died he was laid to rest with all honour.

His tomb has not been found, but the account of his adventures has come down to us, for it was a favorite tale in Ancient Egypt and was written many times on papyrus and read for hundreds of years after his death.