

The Shipwrecked Sailor

When Pharaoh Amen-em-het ruled Egypt in about the year 2000 BC he brought peace and prosperity to a country that had been torn by civil war and rebellion for nearly two hundred years. During his reign adventurers and traders went on many expeditions to the south - either up the Nile through Nubia and even as far as Ethiopia, or along the Red Sea and out into the Indian Ocean to the mysterious land of Punt, whence they brought back jewels and spices and other treasures.

The Royal Court, whether, it was in residence at Thebes or Memphis, was thronged with ships' captains and the leaders of expeditions, each with a tale to tell - and each anxious to win a commission from Pharaoh to command some royal venture on the strength of his past achievements.

One day such a wanderer stopped the Grand Vizier in the palace courtyard at Thebes, and said to him, 'My lord, harken to me a while. I come with costly gifts for Pharaoh, nor shall his counselors such as yourself be forgotten. Listen, and I will tell you of such adventures as have not been told: Pharaoh himself - life, health, strength be to him! - will reward you for bringing to his presence a man with such adventures to tell. I have been to a magic island in the sea far to the south - far beyond Nubia, to the south even of Ethiopia. I beg of you to tell Pharaoh that I am here and would tell my tale to him.'

The Grand Vizier was accustomed to such appeals, and he looked doubtfully at the wanderer and said, 'It seems to me that you speak foolishly and have only vain things to tell. Many men such as you think that a tall story will win them a commission from Pharaoh - but when they tell their tale they condemn themselves out of their own mouths. If what you have to tell is one of these, be sure that I shall have you thrown out of the palace. But if it is of sufficient interest, I may bring you before Pharaoh. Therefore speak on at your own risk, or else remain silent and trouble me no more.'

'I have such a tale to tell,' answered the wanderer, 'that I will risk your anger with an easy mind. When you have heard it, you will beg me to come before Pharaoh and tell it to him - even to the good god Pharaoh Amen-em-het who rules the world. Listen, then:

'I was on my way to the mines of Pharaoh in a great ship rowed by a hundred and fifty sailors who had seen heaven and earth and whose hearts were stronger than lions. We rowed and sailed for many days down the Red Sea and out into the ocean beyond.

'The captain and the steersman swore that they knew the signs of the weather and that the wind would not be strong but would waft us gently on our way. Nevertheless before long a tempest arose suddenly and drove us towards the land. As we drew near the shore the waves were eight cubits in height and they broke over the ship and dashed it upon the rocks. I seized a piece of wood and flung myself into the sea just as the ship ran aground: a moment later it was smashed to pieces and every man perished.

'But a great wave raised the board to which I clung high over the sharp rocks and cast me far up the shore, on level sand, and I was able to crawl into the shelter of the trees out of reach of the cruel, angry sea.

'When day dawned the tempest passed away and the warm sun shone out. I rose up to see where I was, giving thanks to the gods for my delivery when all the rest had perished. I was on an island with no other human being to be a companion to me. But such an island as no man has seen! The broad leaves of the thicket where I lay formed a roof over my head to shield me from the burning midday sun. When I grew hungry and looked about for food, I found all ready for me within easy reach: figs and grapes, all manner of good herbs, berries and grain, melons of all kinds, fishes and birds for the taking.

'At first I satisfied my hunger on the fruits around me. And on the third day I dug a pit and kindled a fire in it on which I made first of all a burnt offering to the gods, and then cooked meat and fish for myself.

'As I sat there comfortably after an excellent meal I suddenly heard a noise like thunder. Nearly beside myself with terror, I flung myself on the ground, thinking that it was some great tidal wave come to engulf the island: for the trees were lashing as if at the breath of the tempest and the earth shook beneath me.

"Moving towards me I saw a serpent thirty cubits long with a beard of more than two cubits."

'But no wave came, and at last I cautiously raised my head and looked about me. Never shall I forget the horror of that moment. Moving towards me I saw a serpent thirty cubits long with a beard of more than two cubits. Its body was covered with golden scales and the scales round its eyes shaded off into blue as pure as lapis lazuli.

'The serpent coiled up its whole length in front of where I lay with my face on the ground, reared its head high above me, and said: "What has brought you, what has brought you here, little one? Say, what has brought you to my island? If you do not tell me at once I will show you what it is to be- burnt with fire, what is it to be burnt utterly to nothing and become a thing invisible. Speak quickly, I am waiting to hear what I have not heard before, some new thing!"

'Then the serpent took me in his huge jaws and carried me away to his cave, and put me down there without hurting me. Yes, though he had held me in his sharp teeth he had not bitten me at all; I was still whole.

'Then he said again, "What has, brought you, what has brought you here, little one? Say what has brought you to this island in the midst of the sea with the waves breaking on all sides of it?"

'At this I managed to speak, crouching before him and bowing my face to the ground as if before Pharaoh himself.

"I sailed by command of Amen-em-het, Pharaoh of Egypt, in a great ship one hundred and fifty cubits in length to bring treasure from the mines of the south. But a great tempest broke upon us and dashed the ship upon the rocks so that all who sailed in her perished except for myself. As for me, I seized a piece of wood and was lifted on it over the rocks and cast upon this island by a mighty wave, and I have been here for three days. So behold me, your suppliant, brought hither by a wave of the sea."

'Then the serpent said to me, "Fear not, fear not, little one, nor let your face show sadness. Since you have come to my island in this way, when all your companions perished, it is because some god has preserved and sent you. For surely Amon-Re has set you thus upon this island of the blessed where nothing is lacking, which is filled with all good things. And now I will tell you of the future: here in this isle shall you remain while one month adds itself to another until four months have passed. Then a ship shall come, a ship of Egypt, and it shall carry you home in safety, and at length you shall die in your own city and be laid to rest in the tomb which you have prepared.

"And now I will tell you of this island. For it is pleasant to hear strange things after fear has been taken away from you - and you will indeed have a tale to tell when you return home and kneel before Pharaoh, your lord and master. Know then that I dwell here with my brethren and my children about me; we are seventy-five serpents in all, children and kindred. And but one stranger has ever come amongst us: a lovely girl who appeared strangely and on whom the fire of heaven fell and who was turned into ashes. As for you, I do not think that heaven holds any thunderbolts for one who has lived through such dangers. It is revealed to me that, if you dwell here in patience, you shall return in the fullness of time and hold your wife and children in your arms once more."

"...if what you have said to me happens indeed, I shall come before Pharaoh and tell him about you, and speak to him of your greatness."

'Then I bowed before him, thanking him for his words of comfort, and said, "All that I have told you is true, and if what you have said to me happens indeed, I shall come before Pharaoh and tell him about you, and speak to him of your greatness. And I will bring as offerings to you sacred oils and perfumes, and such incense as is offered to the gods in their temples.

Moreover I shall tell him of all the wonders of this isle, and I shall sacrifice asses to you, and Pharaoh shall send out a ship filled with the riches of Egypt as presents to your majesty."

'The king serpent laughed at my words, saying, "Truly you are not rich in perfumes - for here in this island I have more than in all the land of Punt. Only the sacred oil which you promise me is scarce here - yet you will never bring it, for when you are gone this island will vanish away and you shall never more see it. Yet doubtless the gods will reveal it in time to come to some other wanderer."

'So I dwelt happily in that enchanted island, and the four months seemed all too short. When they drew to a close I saw a ship sailing over the smooth sea towards me, and I climbed into a high tree to see better what manner of men sailed in it.

And when I perceived that they were men of Egypt, I hastened to the home of the serpent king and told him. But he knew already more than I did myself, and said to me, "Farewell, brave wanderer. Return in safety to your home and may my blessing go with you."

'Then I bowed before him and thanked him, and he gave me gifts of precious perfumes - of cassia and sweet woods, of kohl and cypress, of incense, of ivory and of other precious things. And when I had set these upon the ship and the sailors would have landed, the island seemed to move away from them, floating on the sea. Then night fell suddenly, and when the moon shone out there was no island in sight but only the open waves.

'So we sailed north and in the second month we came to Egypt, and I have made haste to cross the desert from the sea to Thebes. Therefore, I pray you, lead me before Pharaoh, for I long to tell him of my adventures and lay at his feet the gifts of the King of the Serpents, and beg that he will make me commander of a royal ship to sail once more into the ocean that washes the shores of Punt.'

When the wanderer's tale was ended, the Grand Vizier laughed heartily, crying, 'Whether or not I believe your adventures, you have told a tale such as delights the heart of Pharaoh - life, health, strength be to him! Therefore come with me at once, and be sure of a rich reward: to you who tell the tale, and to me who brings before him the teller of the tale.'

So the wanderer passed into the presence of the good god Pharaoh Amen-em-het, and Pharaoh delighted in the story of the shipwrecked sailor so much that his chief scribe Ameni-amen-aa was set to write it down upon a roll of papyrus where it may be read to this very day.