

The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor

Source: Parkinson, R. B. 2009. The Tale of Sinuhe: And Other Ancient Egyptian Poems 1940-1640 BC. Clarendon Press, Oxford 1997 (Pages 92-98).

A clever Follower speaks:

‘May your heart be well, my Count!

Look, we have reached home,
and the mallet is taken, the mooring post driven in,
and the prow-rope has been thrown on the ground;
praises are given and God is thanked,
every man is embracing his fellow,
and our crew has come back safe,
with no loss to our expedition.

We’ve reached the very end of Wawat, and passed Biga!

Look, we have arrived in peace!

Our own land, we’ve reached it!

Listen to me, my Count!

I am free (from) exaggeration.

Wash yourself! Pour water on your hands!

So you may reply when you are addressed,
and speak to the king with self-possession,
and answer without stammering.

A man’s utterance saves him.

His speech turns anger away from him.

But you do as you wish!

It is tiresome to speak to you!

I shall tell you something similar,

which happened to me myself;

I had gone to the Mining Region of the sovereign.

I had gone down to the Sea,

in a boat 120 cubits long,

40 cubits broad,

in which there were 120 sailors from the choicest of Egypt.

They looked at the sea, they looked at the land,

and their hearts were stouter than lions’.

Before it came, they could foretell a gale,

a storm before it existed;

but a gale came up while we were at sea, before we had reached land.

The wind rose, and made an endless howling,

and with it a swell of eight cubits.

Only the mast broke it for me.

Then the boat died.

Those in it – not one of them survived.

Then I was given up onto an island
by a wave of the sea.
With my heart as my only companion,
I spent three days alone.
I spent the nights inside a shelter of wood, and embraced the shadows.
Then I stretched out my legs to learn what I could put in my mouth.

I found figs and grapes there, and every fine vegetable;
and there were sycamore figs there, and also ripened ones,
and melons as if cultivated;
fish were there, and also fowl;
there was nothing which was not in it.
Then I ate my fill, and put aside
what was too much for my arms.
I took a fire drill, made fire,
and made a burnt offering to the Gods.

Then I heard a noise of thunder; I thought it was a wave of the sea,
for the trees were splintering,
the earth shaking;
I uncovered my face and found it was a serpent coming.
There were 30 cubits of him.
His beard was bigger than two cubits,
his flesh overlaid with gold,
and his eyebrows of true lapis lazuli.
He was rearing upwards.

He opened his mouth to me, while I was prostrate in front of him.
He said to me, "Who brought you?
Who brought you, young man?
Who brought you?
If you delay in telling me
who brought you to this island,
I will make you know yourself to be ashes,
turned into invisibility!"

"You speak to me, without me hearing.
I am in front of you, and do not know myself."
Then he put me in his mouth,
took me away to his dwelling place,
and laid me down without harming me.
I was safe, with no damage done to me.

He opened his mouth to me, while I was prostrate in front of him.
Then he said to me: "Who brought you?
Who brought you, young man?
Who brought you to this island of the sea,
with water on all sides?"
Then I answered this to him, my arms bent in front of him.

I said to him, "It's because I was going down
to the Mining Region on a mission of the sovereign,
in a boat of 120 cubits long,
40 cubits broad,
in which there were 120 sailors from the choicest of Egypt.
They looked at the sea, they looked at the land,
and their hearts were stouter than lions'.

Before it came, they could foretell a gale,
a storm before it existed;
each one of them – his heart was stouter,
his arm stronger, than his fellow's.
There was no fool, among them.
And a gale came up while we were at sea, before we had reached land.
The wind rose, and made an endless howling,
and with it a swell of eight cubits.
Only the mast broke it for me.
Then the boat died.
Those in it – not one of them survived, except me.
And look, I am beside you.

Then I was brought to this island
by a wave of the sea."
And he said to me, "Fear not,
fear not, young man!
Do not be pale, for you have reached me!
Look, God has let you live,
and has brought you to this island of the spirit;
there is nothing which is not within it,
and it is full of every good thing.
Look, you will spend month upon month,
until you have completed four months in the interior of this island.
A ship will come from home,
with sailors in it whom you know,
and you will return home with them,
and die in your city.

How happy is he who can tell of his experience,
so that the calamity passes!
I shall tell you something similar,
that happened on this island,
where I was with my kinsmen,
and with children amongst them.
With my offspring and my kinsmen, we were 75 serpents in all –
I shall not evoke the little daughter,
whom I had wisely brought away.

Then a star fell,
and because of it they went up in flames.

Now this happened when I wasn't with them;
they were burnt when I wasn't among them.
Then I died for them, when I found them as a single heap of corpses.
If you are brave, master your heart,
and you will fill your embrace with your children,
kiss your wife, and see your house!
This is better than anything.
You will reach home, and remain there,
amongst your kinsmen.
Stretched out prostrate was I,
and I touched the ground in front of him.

I said to him, "I shall tell your power to the sovereign.
I shall cause him to comprehend your greatness.
I shall have them bring you laudanum and malabathrum, terebinth and balsam,
and the incense of the temple estates with which every God is content.
I shall tell what has happened to me, as what I have seen of your power.
They will thank God for you in the city
before the council of the entire land.

I shall slaughter bulls for you as a burnt offering.
I shall strangle fowls for you.
I shall have boats brought for you
laden with all the wealth of Egypt,
as is done for a God who loves mankind,
in a far land, unknown to mankind."

Then he laughed at me, at the things I had said,
which were folly to his heart.
He said to me, "Do you have much myrrh,
or all existing types of incense?
For I am the ruler of Punt;
myrrh is mine;
that malabathrum you speak of bringing
is this island's plenty.
And once it happens that you have left this place,
you will never see this island again, which will have become water."

Then that boat came,
as he had foretold previously.
Then I went and put myself up a tall tree,
and I recognised those inside it.
Then I went to report this,
and I found that he knew it.
Then he said to me, "Fare well,
fare well young man,
to your house, and see your children!
Spread my renown in your city! Look, this is my due from you."

Then I prostrated myself,
my arms bent in front of him.
Then he gave me a cargo
of myrrh and malabathrum,
terebinth and balsam,
camphor, shaasekh-spice, and eye-paint,
tails of giraffes,
a great mound of incense,
elephant tusks,
hounds and monkeys,
apes and all good riches.

Then I loaded this onto the ship,
and it was then that I prostrated myself to thank God for him.
Then he said to me, "Look, you will arrive within two months!
You will fill your embrace with your children.
You will grow young again at home, and be buried."
Then I went down to the shore nearby this ship.
Then I called to the expedition which was in this ship,
and I on the shore gave praises
to the lord of this island,
and those who were aboard did the same.

We then sailed northwards,
to the Residence of the sovereign,
and we reached home
in two months, exactly as he had said.
Then I entered before the sovereign,
and I presented him with this tribute
from the interior of this island.
Then he thanked God for me before the council of the entire land.
Then I was appointed as a Follower;
I was endowed with 200 persons.
Look at me, after I have reached land, and have viewed my past experience!
Listen to my (speech)!
Look, it is good to listen to men.'
Then he said to me, 'Don't act clever, my friend!
Who pours water (for) a goose,
when the day dawns for its slaughter on the morrow?'

*So it ends, from start to finish,
as found in writing,
(as) a writing of the scribe with clever fingers,
Ameny son of Amenya (l.p.h!).*



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