

V. Prose Tales

Perhaps more than any other genre of Egyptian literature, these few surviving prose tales speak to the modern reader, for they are creations of the universal storytelling impulse, and of an imagination that roamed and played upon experience, unfettered by the functional orientation of most Egyptian literary works. It would be a mistake, however, to think of these tales as being folklore, as being simply and artlessly told. Like all Egyptian writings, the tales come from the sphere of the educated scribes and from the ambience of the court. It is true that the style of the *Shipwrecked Sailor* is considerably simpler than that of *Simuhe*. It is nevertheless written in a literary style that is quite distinct from the colloquial language one finds in the private letters.

The *Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor*, and the *Tales from Papyrus Westcar* share the quality of fairy tales. They are tales of wonder, of miraculous events in which human beings encounter the supernatural. The *Story of Simuhe*, on the other hand, is the story of a life as it could have been lived. In fact it may be a true story. It is told in the form of the autobiography composed for the tomb, and at least one scholar has voiced the hope that the original tomb-text may yet be found. Whether or not it relates the actual experience of an individual, the story reflects a true historical situation—the death of Amenemhet I and the reign of Sesostris I. But to the Egyptians it was above all a tale magnificently told, which, using all the modes of a rich and refined literary art, created a character whose actions, sorrows, and joys enthralled the listeners. It became a classic, endlessly recopied, and it can still fascinate today.

THE TALE OF THE SHIPWRECKED SAILOR

The only preserved papyrus copy of the tale was discovered by Golenischeff in the Imperial Museum of St. Petersburg. Nothing is known about its original provenience. The papyrus, called P. Leningrad 1115, is now in Moscow. The work, and the papyrus copy, date from the Middle Kingdom.

The tale is set in a narrative frame. A high official is returning from an expedition that apparently failed in its objective, for he is despondent and fearful of the reception awaiting him at court. One of his attendants exhorts him to take courage, and as an example of how a disaster may turn into a success, tells him a marvelous adventure that happened to him years ago. At the end of his tale, however, the official is still despondent.

Publication: W. Golenischeff, *Papyrus hiératiques*, pls. 1-8. A. Erman, *ZAS*, 43 (1906), 1-26. W. Golenischeff, *Le conte du naufragé*, Bibliothèque d'étude, 2 (Cairo, 1912). A. M. Blackman, *Middle Egyptian Stories*, Bibliotheca Aegyptiaca, II (Brussels, 1932), pp. 41-48.

Translation: Erman, *Literature*, pp. 29-35. Lefèbvre, *Romans*, pp. 29-40. Brunner-Traut, *Märchen*, pp. 5-10. For additional references see Lefèbvre, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

(1) The worthy attendant said: Take heart, my lord! We have reached home. The mallet has been seized, the mooring-post staked, the prow-rope placed (5) on land. Praise is given, god is thanked, everyone embraces his fellow. Our crew has returned safely; our troops have had no loss. We have left Wawat behind, we have passed (10) Senmut; we have returned in safety, we have reached our land. Now listen to me, my lord! I am not exaggerating. Wash yourself, pour water over your fingers. You must answer (15) when questioned. You must speak to the king with presence of mind. You must answer without stammering! A man's mouth can save him. His speech makes one forgive him. (20) But do as you like! It is tiresome to talk to you.

But I shall tell you something like it that happened to me. I had set out to the king's mines, and had gone (25) to sea in a ship of a hundred and twenty cubits in length and forty cubits in width. One hundred and twenty sailors were in it of the pick of Egypt. Looked they at sky, looked they at land, their hearts were stouter (30) than lions. They could foretell a storm before it came, a tempest before it broke.

A storm came up while we were at sea, before we could reach land. As we sailed (35) it made a "swell", and in it a wave eight cubits tall. The mast—it (the wave) struck (it).¹ Then the ship died. Of those in it not one remained. I was cast (40) on an island by a wave of the sea. I spent three days alone, with my heart as companion. Lying in the shelter of trees I hugged (45) the shade.

Then I stretched my legs to discover what I might put in my mouth. I found figs and grapes there, all sorts of fine vegetables, sycamore figs, unnotched and notched,² (50) and cucumbers that were as if tended. Fish were there and fowl; there is nothing that was not there. I stuffed myself and put some down, because I had too much in my arms. Then I cut a fire drill, (55) made a fire and gave a burnt offering to the gods.

Then I heard a thundering noise and thought, "It is a wave of the sea." Trees splintered, (60) the ground trembled. Uncovering my face, I found it was a snake that was coming. He was of thirty cubits; his beard was over two cubits long. His body was overlaid (65) with gold; his eyebrows were of real lapis lazuli. He was bent up in front.

Then he opened his mouth to me, while I was on my belly before him. He said to me: "Who brought you, who brought you, fellow, (70)

who brought you? If you delay telling me who brought you to this island, I shall make you find yourself reduced to ashes, becoming like a thing unseen." <I said>: "Though you speak to me, I do not hear (75) it; I am before you without knowing myself." Then he took me in his mouth, carried me to the place where he lived, and set me down unhurt, (80) I being whole with nothing taken from me.

Then he opened his mouth to me, while I was on my belly before him. He said to me: "Who brought you, who brought you, fellow, who brought you to this island (85) of the sea, whose two sides are in water?" Then I answered him, my arms bent before him. I said to him: "I had set out (90) to the mines on a mission of the king in a ship of a hundred and twenty cubits in length and forty cubits in width. One hundred and twenty sailors were in it of the pick of Egypt. (95) Looked they at sky, looked they at land, their hearts were stouter than lions. They could foretell a storm before it came, a tempest before it struck. Each of them—his heart was stouter, (100) his arm stronger than his mate's. There was no fool among them. A storm came up while we were at sea, before we could reach land. As we sailed it made a 'swell', and in it a wave (105) eight cubits tall. The mast—it struck (it). Then the ship died. Of those in it not one remained, except myself who is here with you. I was brought to this island (110) by a wave of the sea."

Then he said to me: "Don't be afraid, don't be afraid, fellow; don't be pale-faced, now that you have come to me. It is god who has let you live and brought you to this island of the *ka*.³ (115) There is nothing that is not in it; it is full of all good things. You shall pass month upon month until you have completed four months in this island. Then (120) a ship will come from home with sailors in it whom you know. You shall go home with them, you shall die in your town.

"How happy is he who tells what he has tasted,⁴ when the calamity has passed. (125) I shall tell you something similar that happened on this island. I was here with my brothers and there were children with them. In all we were seventy-five serpents, children and brothers, without mentioning a little daughter whom I had obtained through prayer. Then a star (130) fell, and they went up in flames through it. It so happened that I was not with them in the fire, I was not among them. I could have died for their sake when I found them as one heap of corpses.

"If you are brave and control your heart, you shall embrace your children, you shall kiss your wife, you shall see your home. It is better

than everything else. (135) You shall reach home, you shall be there among your brothers."

Stretched out on my belly I touched the ground before him; then I said to him: "I shall speak of your power to the king, I shall let him know (140) of your greatness. I shall send you *ibi* and *hknw* oils, laudanum, *hsyt*-spice, and the incense of the temples which pleases all the gods. I shall tell what happened to me, what I saw of your power. One will praise god for you in the city before the councillors of the whole land. I shall slaughter (145) oxen for you as burnt offering; I shall sacrifice geese to you. I shall send you ships loaded with all the treasures of Egypt, as is done for a god who befriends people in a distant land not known to the people."

Then he laughed at me for the things I had said, which seemed foolish to him. (150) He said to me: "You are not rich in myrrh and all kinds of incense. But I am the lord of Punt, and myrrh is my very own. That *hknw*-oil you spoke of sending, it abounds on this island. Moreover, when you have left this place, you will not see this island again; it will have become water."

Then the ship (155) came, as he had foretold. I went and placed myself on a tall tree, I recognized those that were in it. When I went to report it, I found that he knew it. He said to me: "In health, in health, fellow, to your home, that you may see your children! Make me a good name in your town; that is what I ask (160) of you." I put myself on my belly, my arms bent before him. Then he gave me a load of myrrh, *hknw*-oil, laudanum, *hsyt*-spice, *tšpss*-spice, perfume, eye-paint, giraffe's tails, great lumps of incense, (165) elephant's tusks, greyhounds, long-tailed monkeys, baboons, and all kinds of precious things.

I loaded them on the ship. Then I put myself on my belly to thank him and he said to me: "You will reach home in two months. You will embrace your children. You will flourish at home, you will be buried."⁵

I went down to the shore (170) near the ship; I hailed the crew which was in the ship. I gave praise on the shore to the lord of the island, those in the ship did the same. We sailed north to the king's residence. We reached the residence in two months, all as he had said. I went in to the king; (175) I presented to him the gifts I had brought from the island. He praised god for me in the presence of the councillors of the whole land. I was made an attendant and endowed with serfs of his.

See me after (180) I had reached land, after I saw what I had tasted!
Listen to me! It is good for people to listen.

He said to me: "Don't make an effort, my friend. Who would give water at dawn (185) to a goose that will be slaughtered in the morning?"

Colophon: It is done from beginning to end as it was found in writing, by the scribe with skilled fingers, Imenaa, son of Imeny—life, prosperity, health!

NOTES

1. The sentence has been read as: *in ht hw n-t s(t)*, and rendered as "the mast (or, a piece of wood) struck the wave for me," thereby flattening it and thus helping the sailor, while the ship nevertheless sank. But the sense is poor, for the context leads one to expect that the wave hit the ship and sank it. I believe that the element *nt* is not the preposition with suffix but rather the common graphic peculiarity of the spelling of *hwt*, "to strike," and also of *hwt*, "to flood," with an intrusive *nt* (see *Wb.*, III, 49). I also take the *s* to be the suffix referring to the wave; and the dependent pronoun *sw* needs to be added as the object. This admittedly imperfect solution is presented largely in order to emphasize that the passage remains problematic.

2. I.e., unripe and ripe figs; the ripe ones were notched, as was explained by L. Keimer, *Acta Or.*, 6 (1928), 288 ff., and *idem*, *BFAO*, 28 (1928), 50 ff.

3. The expression "island of the *ka*" is curious. In *ZAS*, 45 (1908), 65, Gardiner rendered it as "phantom island."

4. Egyptian says "to taste" for "to experience."

5. This has been the usual rendering of *rnpy-k m hmw krs-t-k*, in which *hmw* was taken to mean "home," as it does elsewhere in the tale, and *krs-t-k* to stand for *krs-tw-k*. Brunner-Traut, *Märchen*, p. 9, now renders: "und wirst dich in deinem Grabe verjüngen." This is grammatically perfect, but I find the older rendering more plausible, since the emphasis of the tale is on the "return home."

THREE TALES OF WONDER

From Papyrus Westcar (= P. Berlin 3033)

This important papyrus, the beginning of which is lost, contains a series of tales woven together by a narrative frame. The whole cycle consisted of at least five tales. Of the first, only the last words are preserved. The second has large lacunae, while the third, fourth, and fifth are complete except for the abrupt ending of the fifth tale. The three complete tales are translated here. The works are written in classical Middle Egyptian; the papyrus dates from the Hyksos period.

The setting of the tales is the Old Kingdom, specifically the time of the Fourth Dynasty: King Khufu is being entertained by his sons. First each son in turn tells a marvelous event that happened in the past. Then, when it is the turn of Prince Hardedef, instead of telling a story of past wonders,