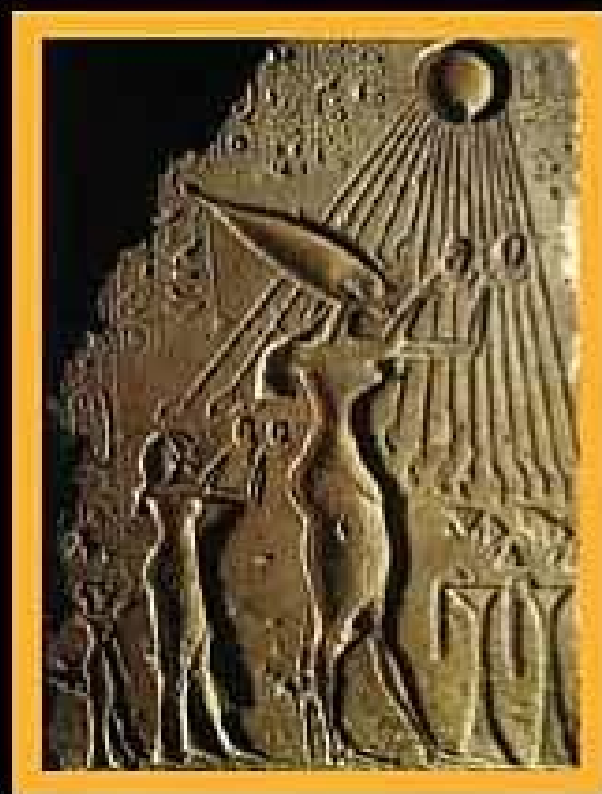


International Bestseller!

The Egyptian

a novel



MIKA WALTARI

Foreword by Lynda S. Robinson

THE EGYPTIAN

by Mika Waltari

Translated by Naomi Walford

Flyleaf:

The Egyptian is the full-bodied recreation of an era hitherto untapped by fiction. As such it is rich with fresh veins of fascinating lore. Entirely authentic, it is written with a literary excellence of which few contemporary historical novels can boast.

The story of *The Egyptian* is rolled out on a tremendous canvas. Set in Egypt, more than a thousand years before Christ, it encompasses all of the then-known world. It is told by Sinuhe, physician to the Pharaoh, and is the story of his life. Through his eyes are seen innumerable characters, full drawn and covering the whole panorama of the ancient world. Events of war, intrigue, murder, passion, love, and religious strife are revealed as Sinuhe describes his often brilliant, often bitter, life.

There is real grandeur to *The Egyptian*. It has the broad sweep of truly major fiction, a powerful narrative pace coupled with intense human interest. It is the astonishing triumph of a great creative imagination.

The author, Mika Waltari, is probably the most famous living writer in his native Finland. His book has enjoyed enormous success around the world.

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BOOK 1

The Reed Boat

I, SINUHE, the son of Senmut and of his wife Kipa, write this. I do not write it to the glory of the gods in the land of Kem, for I am weary of gods, nor to the glory of the Pharaohs, for I am weary of the deeds. I write neither from fear nor from any hope of the future but for myself alone. During my life I have seen, known, and lost too much to be the prey of vain dread; and, as for the hope of immortality, I am as weary of that as I am of gods and kings. For my own sake only I write this; and herein I differ from all other writers, past and to come.

I begin this book in the third year of my exile on the shores of the Eastern Sea, whence ships put out for the land of Punt, near the desert, near those hills from which stone was quarried to build the statues of former kings. I write it because wine is bitter to my tongue, because I have lost my pleasure in women, and because neither gardens nor fish pools delight me any more. I have driven away the singers, and the sound of pipes and strings is torment to my ear. Therefore, I write this, I, Sinuhe, who make no use of my wealth, my golden cups, my ebony, ivory, and myrrh.

They have not been taken from me. Slaves still fear my rod; guards bow their heads and stretch out their hands at knee level before me. But bounds have been set to my walking, and no ships can put out through the surf of these shores; never again shall I smell the smell of black earth on a night in spring.

My name was once inscribed in Pharaoh's golden book, and I dwelt at his right hand. My words outweighed those of the mighty in the land of Kem; nobles sent me gifts, and chains of gold were hung about my neck. I possessed all that a man can desire, but like a man I desired more—therefore, I am what I am. I was driven from Thebes in the sixth year of the reign of Pharaoh Horemheb, to be beaten to death like a cur if I returned—to be crushed like a frog between the stones if I took one step beyond the area prescribed for my dwelling place. This is by command of the King, of Pharaoh who was once my friend.

But before I begin my book I will let my heart cry out in lamentation, for so an exile's heart must cry when it is black with sorrow.

He who has once drunk of Nile water will forever yearn to be by the Nile again; his thirst cannot be quenched by the waters of any other land.

I would exchange my cup for an earthenware mug if my feet might once more tread the soft dust of the land of Kem. I would give my linen clothes for the skins of a slave if once more I might hear the reeds of the river rustling in the spring wind.

Clear were the waters of my youth; sweet was my folly. Bitter is the wine of age, and not the choicest honeycomb can equal the coarse bread of my poverty. Turn, O you years—roll again, you vanished years—sail, Ammon, from west to east across the heavens and bring again my youth! Not one word of it will I alter, not my least action will I amend. O brittle pen, smooth papyrus, give me back my folly and my youth!

Senmut, whom I called my father, was physician to the poor of Thebes, and Kipa was his wife. They had no children, and they were old when I came to them. In their simplicity they said I was a gift from the gods, little guessing what evil the gift would bring them. Kipa named me Sinuhe after someone

a story, for she loved stories, and it seemed to her that I had come fleeing from danger like my namesake of the legend, who by chance overheard a frightful secret in Pharaoh's tent and fled, to live for many adventurous years in foreign lands.

This was but a childish notion of hers; she hoped that I, too, would always run from danger and avoid misfortune. But the priests of Ammon hold that a name is an omen, and it may be that mine brought me peril and adventure and sent me into foreign lands. It made me a sharer in dreadful secrets—secrets of kings and their wives—secrets that may be the bearers of death. And at the last my name made me a fugitive and an exile.

Yet I should be as childish as poor Kipa to fancy that a name can influence one's destiny; would not have been the same if I had been called Kepru or Kafran or Moses? So I believe—yet Sinuhe was indeed exiled whereas Heb, the son of the Falcon, was crowned as Horemheb with the red and white crown, to be king over the Upper and Lower Kingdoms. As to the significance of names, therefore each must judge for himself; each in his own faith will find solace against the evils and reverses of this life.

I was born in the reign of the great King Amenhotep III and in the same year as that one who desired to live by truth and whose name may no longer be named because it is accursed—though at the time nothing of this was known. There was great rejoicing at the palace when he was born, and the King brought many sacrifices to the great temple of Ammon that he had built; the people also were glad, not knowing what was to come. The royal consort Taia had until then hoped vainly for a son though she had been consort for twenty-two years and her name was written beside that of the King in the temples and upon the statues. Therefore, he whose name may no longer be named was proclaimed heir with elaborate ceremonial as soon as the priests had performed the circumcision.

He was not born until the spring in the sowing season, whereas I had come the previous autumn when the floods stood at their highest. The day of my birth is unknown, for I came drifting down the Nile in a little reed boat daubed with pitch, and my mother Kipa found me among the reeds on the shore close by her own doorstep. The swallows had just returned and were twittering above me, but I lay so still that she believed me dead. She brought me to her house and warmed me by the charcoal fire and blew into my mouth until I whimpered.

My father Senmut came back from visiting his patients, carrying two ducks and a bushel of flour. When he heard me crying, he thought Kipa had adopted a kitten and was about to rebuke her, but my mother said, "It is not a cat—I have a son! Rejoice, Senmut my husband, for a son has been born to us!"

My father called her an idiot and was angry until she showed me to him, and then he was moved by my helplessness. So they adopted me as their own child and even put it about among the neighbors that Kipa had borne me. This was foolish, and I do not know how many believed her. But Kipa kept the reed boat that brought me and hung it up in the roof above my bed. My father took his best copper bowl to the temple and had me registered in the book of births as his own son born of Kipa, but at the circumcision he did himself, for he was a doctor and feared the priests' knives because they left infected wounds. He did not let the priests touch me. Also he may have wanted to save money, for a poor people's doctor is not a wealthy man.

I cannot, of course, recall these things, but my parents have told me of them so often and in such unvarying phrases that I must believe them and have no reason to suppose they lied. Throughout my childhood I never doubted that they were my parents, and no sadness darkened those years. They d

not tell me the truth until my boy's locks were shorn and I became a youth. They told me then because they feared and honored the gods, and my father did not want me to live a lie my whole life through.

But who I was, whence I came, and who my parents were I never learned, though—for reasons I shall speak of later—I believe I know.

One thing is certain: I was not the only one to be carried down the river in a pitched-reed boat. Thebes with its palaces and its temples was a big city, and the mud hovels of the poor clustered thickly about the statelier buildings. In the time of the great Pharaohs Egypt had brought many nations under its sway, and with power and wealth came altered customs. Foreigners came to Thebes, merchants and craftsmen built temples there to their own gods. Great was the splendor and wealth of the temples and the palaces, great also the poverty outside the walls. Many poor people put their children out; many a rich wife, whose husband was away on his travels, abandoned the proof of her adultery to the river. Perhaps I was the son of a seaman's wife who had deceived her husband with some Syrian merchant. Perhaps—as I had not been circumcised—I was some foreigner's child. When my hair was cut and my mother had put it away in a little wooden box with my first sandals, I looked long at the reed boat she showed me. The struts were yellowed and broken and sooty with smoke from the brazier. It was tied with fowler's knots, but that was all it could tell me of my parentage. It was then that my heart felt its first wound.

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With the approach of age the soul flies like a bird back to the days of childhood. Now those days shine bright and clear in my memory until it seems as if everything then must have been better and lovelier than in the world of today. In this rich and poor do not differ, for there is surely none so destitute but his childhood shows some glint of happiness when he remembers it in age.

My father Senmut lived upstream from the temple walls, in a squalid, noisy quarter. Near his house lay the big stone wharves where the Nile boats discharged their cargoes, and in the narrow alley ways were the seamen's and merchants' taverns and the brothels to which the wealthy also came, borne on chairs from the inner city. Our neighbors were tax collectors, barge masters, noncommissioned officers, and a few priests of the fifth grade. Like my father, they belonged to the more respected part of the population, rising above it as a wall rises above the surface of the water.

Our house, therefore, was spacious in comparison with the mud huts of the very poor that huddled sadly along the narrow alleys. We had even a garden a few paces long with a sycamore in it that my father had planted. The garden was fenced from the street by acacia bushes, and for a pool we had a stone trough that contained water only at floodtime. There were four rooms to the house, and in one of them my mother prepared our food, which we ate on a veranda opening out of my father's surgery. Twice a week a woman came to help my mother clean the house—for Kipa was very cleanly—and once a week a washerwoman fetched our linen to her wash place on the river bank.

In this rowdy quarter, where there were many foreigners—a quarter whose degradation was revealed to me only as I grew out of childhood—my father and his neighbors upheld tradition and a venerable customs. At a time when among even the aristocrats of the city these customs lapsed, he and his class continued rigidly to represent the Egypt of the past in their reverence for the gods, the purity of heart, and selflessness. It seemed as if they desired to dissociate themselves by their behavior from those with whom they were obliged to live and work.

But why speak now of what I only later understood? Why not rather remember the gnarled trunk of the sycamore, and the sighing of the leaves when I sought shelter at its foot from the scorching sun, and my favorite toy, the wooden crocodile that snapped its jaws and showed its red gullet when I pulled it along the paved street on a string? The neighbors' children would gather to stare at it in wonder. I won many a honey sweetmeat, many a shiny stone and snippet of copper wire by letting others drag it along and play with it. Only children of high rank had such toys as a rule, but my father was given it by the palace carpenter, whom he had cured of a boil that prevented him from sitting down.

In the morning my mother would take me with her to the vegetable market. She never had many purchases to make, yet she could spend a water measure's time choosing a bunch of onions and the whole of every morning for a week if it were a matter of choosing new shoes. By the way she talked one might have judged her to be rich and concerned merely with having the best; if she did not buy a thing that took her fancy—why, then it was because she wished to bring me up in thrifty ways. She would declare, "It is not the man with silver and gold who is rich, but the man who is content with little." Still she would assure me, while her poor old eyes dwelt longingly upon the brightly colored woolen stuffs from Sidon and Byblos, as fine and light as down. Her brown, work-hardened hands caressed the ostrich feathers and the ornaments of ivory. It was all vanity, she told me—and herself. But the child's mind rebelled against these precepts; I longed to own a monkey that put its arm about its master's neck or a brilliant-feathered bird that shrieked Syrian and Egyptian words. And I should have had nothing against gold chains and gilded sandals. It was not until much later that I realized how dear poor old Kipa longed to be rich.

Being but the wife of a poor physician, she stilled her yearnings with stories. Before we fell asleep at night she would tell me in a low voice all the tales she knew. She told of Sinuhe and of the shipwrecked man who returned from the Serpent King with countless riches, of gods and evil spirits, of sorcerers, and of the Pharaohs of old. My father often murmured at this and said she was filling my head with nonsense, but when it was evening and he had begun to snore, she would continue, as much for her own pleasure as for mine. I remember those stifling summer nights when the pallet scorched my bare body and sleep would not come; I hear her hushed, soothing voice; I am safe with her once more... . My own mother could hardly have been kinder or more tender than simple, superstitious Kipa, at whose hands blind and crippled storytellers were sure of a good meal.

The stories pleased me, but as a counterweight there was the lively street, that haunt of flies, the street that was filled with a thousand scents and smells. From the harbor the wind would bring the fresh tang of cedarwood and myrrh, or a breath of perfumed oil when a noble lady passing in her chariot leaned out to curse the street boys. In the evenings, when Ammon's golden boat swung down to the western hills, there arose from all the nearby huts and verandas the smell of fried fish mingled with the aroma of newly baked bread. This smell of the poor quarter in Thebes I learned to love as a child, and I have never forgotten it.

It was during meals on the veranda that I received the first teachings from my father. He would enter the garden wearily from the street or come from his surgery with the sharp odor of ointments and drugs clinging to his clothes. My mother poured water over his hands, and we sat on stools to eat while she served us. Sometimes while we were sitting there, a gang of sailors would reel along the street, yelling drunkenly, beating with sticks upon the walls of the houses, or stopping to relieve themselves by our acacias. My father, being a discreet man, said nothing until they had gone by; then he would tell me, "Only a Negro or a dirty Syrian does that in the street. An Egyptian goes between

walls.”

Or he would say, “Wine enjoyed in moderation is the gods’ gift to us, and rejoices our hearts. One beaker hurts no one. Two loosen the tongue, but the man who drinks a jar of it wakes to find himself in the gutter, robbed and beaten.”

Sometimes a breath of perfumed ointments would reach the veranda when a lovely woman went by on foot, robed transparently, with cheeks, lips, and eyebrows beautifully painted and in her liquid eyes a glint never seen in those of the virtuous. When I gazed spellbound upon such a one, my father would say gravely, “Beware of a woman who calls you ‘pretty boy’ and entices you, for her heart is a net and her body a snare, and her body burns worse than fire.”

It was no wonder that after such teachings my childish soul began to fear the wine jar and beautiful women who were not like ordinary women, though both became endowed with the perilous charm of feared and forbidden things.

While I was yet a child, my father let me attend his consultations; he showed me his scalpel, forceps, and jars of medicine and explained their uses to me. When he examined his patients, I had to stand beside him and hand him bowls of water, dressings, oil and wine. My mother could not endure to see wounds and sores and never understood my interest in disease. A child does not appreciate suffering until he has experienced it. To me, the lancing of a boil was a thrilling operation, and I would proudly tell the other boys all I had seen to win their respect. Whenever a new patient arrived I would follow my father’s examination and questions with close attention until at last he said, “The disease can be cured,” or “I will undertake your treatment.” There were also those whom he did not feel competent to treat. Then he would write a few lines on a strip of papyrus and send them to the House of Life, in the temple. When such a patient had left him, he would usually sigh, shake his head, and say, “Poor creature!”

Not all my father’s patients were needy. Patrons of nearby pleasure houses were sent to him now and again to be bandaged after some brawl, and their clothes were of finest linen. Masters of Syrian ships came sometimes when they had boils or toothache. I was not surprised, therefore, when the wife of a spice dealer came for examination one day wearing jewelry and a collar sparkling with precious stones. She sighed and moaned and lamented over her many afflictions while my father listened attentively. I was greatly disappointed when at last he took up a strip of paper to write upon, for I had hoped he would be able to cure her and so acquire many fine presents. I sighed, shook my head, and whispered to myself, “Poor creature!”

The sick woman gave a frightened start and looked uneasily at my father. He wrote a line in ancient characters copied from a worn papyrus scroll, then poured oil and wine into a mixing bowl and soaked the paper in it until the ink had been dissolved by the wine. Then he poured the liquid into an earthenware jar and gave it to the spice dealer’s wife as a medicine, telling her to take some of it whenever head or stomach began to pain her. When the woman had gone, I looked at my father, who seemed embarrassed. He coughed once or twice and said, “Many diseases can be cured with ink that has been used for a powerful invocation.”

He said no more aloud, but muttered to himself after a time, “At least it can do the patient no harm.”

When I was seven years old, I was given a boy’s loincloth and my mother took me to the temple to attend a sacrifice. Ammon’s temple in Thebes was at that time the mightiest in all Egypt. An avenue bordered with ram’s-headed sphinxes carved in stone led to it, right through the city from the temple

and pool of the moon goddess. The temple area was surrounded by massive brick walls and with many buildings formed a city within the city. From the tops of the towering pylons floated colorful pennants, and gigantic statues of kings guarded the copper gates on each side of the enclosure.

We went through the gates, and the sellers of Books of the Dead pulled at my mother's clothes and made their offers shrilly or in a whisper. Mother took me to look at the carpenters' shops with the display of wooden images of slaves and servants, which, after consecration by the priests, would serve their owners in the next world so that these need never lift a finger to help themselves.

My mother paid the fee demanded of spectators, and I saw white-robed, deft-handed priests slay a quarter a bull between whose horns a braid of papyrus bore a seal, testifying that the beast was without blemish or a single black hair. The priests were fat and holy, and their shaven heads gleamed with oil. There were a hundred or so people who had come to attend the sacrifice, but the priests paid little heed to them and chatted freely to one another of their own affairs throughout the ceremony. I gazed at the warlike pictures on the temple walls and marveled at the gigantic columns, failing altogether to understand my mother's emotion when with tear-filled eyes she led me home. There she took off my baby shoes and gave me new sandals that were uncomfortable and chafed my feet until I grew used to them.

After the meal my father, with a grave look upon his face, laid his big, clever hand on my head and stroked with shy tenderness the soft locks at my temple.

"Now you are seven years old, Sinuhe, and must decide what you want to be."

"A warrior!" I said at once, and was puzzled by the disappointed look on his good face. For the best games the street boys played were war games, and I had watched soldiers wrestle and perfect themselves in the use of arms in front of the barracks and had seen plumed war chariots race forth on thundering wheels to maneuvers outside the city. There could be nothing nobler or grander than a warrior's career. Moreover, a soldier need not be able to write, and this was what weighed most with me, for older boys told terrible tales of how difficult the art of writing was and of how mercilessly the teachers pulled the pupils' hair if they chanced to smash a clay tablet or break a reed pen between their unskilled fingers.

It is likely that my father was never a notably gifted man, or he would surely have become something more than a poor man's doctor. But he was conscientious in his work and never harmed his patients and in the course of years had become wise through experience. He knew already how touchy and self-willed I was and made no comment on my resolve.

Presently, however, he asked my mother for a bowl, and going to his workroom, he filled the vessel with cheap wine from a jar.

"Come, Sinuhe," he said, and he led me out of the house and down to the river bank. By the quay we stopped to look at a barge from which stunted porters were unloading wares sewn up in matting. The sun was setting among the western hills beyond the City of the Dead, but these serfs toiled on, panting and dripping with sweat. The overseer stung them with his whip while the clerk sat placidly beneath his awning, checking off each bale on his list.

"Would you like to be one of those?" asked my father.

I thought this a stupid question and gaped at him without answering. No one wanted to be like the porters.

"They labor from early morning till late at night," said Senmut. "Their skins have coarsened like crocodile's; their fists are gross as crocodile's feet. Only when darkness falls can they crawl to the

miserable huts, and their food is a scrap of bread, an onion, and a mouthful of thin, bitter beer. That the porter's life, the ploughman's life, the life of all who labor with their hands. Do you think they are to be envied?"

I shook my head, still looking at him in wonder. It was a soldier I desired to be, not a porter, scratcher of the soil, a waterer of the fields, or a dung-caked shepherd.

"Father," I said as we went on, "soldiers have a fine time. They live in barracks and eat good food. In the evening they drink wine in the pleasure houses, and women smile at them. The leaders among them wear golden chains about their necks although they cannot write. When they return from battle they bring with them booty and slaves who toil and follow trades to serve them. Why shouldn't I strive to become a warrior, too?"

My father made no answer but hastened his step. Near the big rubbish dump where flies buzzed in a cloud about us he bent down and peered into a low mud hovel.

"Inteb, my friend, are you there?"

Out crawled a verminous old man leaning on a stick. His right arm had been lopped off below the shoulder, and his loincloth was stiff with dirt. His face was dried and wizened with age, and he had no teeth.

"Is—is *that* Inteb?" I gasped, looking at the old man in horror. Inteb was a hero who had fought in the Syrian campaigns under Thothmes III, the greatest of the Pharaohs, and stories were still told of his prowess and of the rewards that Pharaoh had given him.

The old man raised his hand in a soldier's salute, and my father handed him the bowl of wine. Then they sat down on the ground for there was not even a bench outside the hut, and Inteb raised the wine to his lips with a trembling hand, careful not to waste a drop.

"My son Sinuhe means to be a warrior," my father smiled. "I brought him to you, Inteb, because you are the last survivor of the heroes of the great wars and can tell him of the proud life and splendid feats of soldiers."

"In the name of Set and Baal and all other devils!" cackled the other, turning his nearsighted gaze upon me. "Is the boy mad?"

His toothless mouth, dim eyes, dangling arm stump, and wrinkled, grimy breast were so terrifying that I crept behind my father and gripped his arm.

"Boy, boy," tittered Inteb, "if I had a mouthful of wine for every curse I have uttered upon my life and upon fate—miserable fate that made a soldier of me—I could fill the lake that Pharaoh has made for his old woman. True, I have never seen it because I cannot afford to be ferried across the river, but I doubt not I could fill it—ay, and that there would be enough over to fuddle an army."

He drank again, sparingly.

"But," said I, my chin quivering, "the soldier's profession is the most honorable of all."

"Honor! Renown!" said Inteb, hero of the armies of Thothmes. "Droppings—ordure where flies are bred—no more! Many a lie have I told in my time to get wine out of the goggling blockheads who listened to me, but your father is an upright man whom I will not deceive. Therefore, son, I tell you that of all professions the warrior's is the most wretched and most degraded."

The wine was smoothing out the wrinkles in his face and kindling a glow in his wild old eyes. He rose and gripped his neck with his one hand.

"Look, boy! This scraggy neck was once hung with golden chains—five loops of them. Pharaoh

himself hung them there. Who can reckon the lopped-off hands I have heaped before his tent? Who was the first to scale the walls of Kadesh? Who burst through the enemy ranks like a trumpeting elephant? It was I—I, Inteb the hero! And who thanks me for it now? My gold went the way of all earthly things, and the slaves I took in battle ran away or perished miserably. My right hand I left behind in the land of Mitanni, and I should long ago have been begging at street corners were it not for the charitable people who give me dried fish and beer now and then for telling their children the truth about war. I am Inteb, the great hero—look at me! I left my youth in the desert, robbed of it by starvation, privation, and hardship. There the flesh melted from my limbs, my skin toughened, and my heart hardened to stone. Worst of all, the parched desert dried my tongue, and I became the prey of an unquenchable thirst, like every other soldier who returns alive from foreign wars. And life has been like the valley of death since I lost my arm. I need not so much as mention the pain of the wound or the agony when the army surgeons scalded the stump in boiling oil after the amputation—that is something your father can appreciate. Blessed be your name, Senmut! You are a just man, a good man—but the wine is finished.”

The old fellow fell silent, panted a little, and sitting down again upon the ground, he turned the earthenware bowl sadly upside down. His eyes were glowing embers, and he was once more an old unhappy man.

“But a warrior need not know how to write,” came my faltering whisper.

“H’m,” said the old man and looked sideways at my father, who quickly took a copper bangle from his arm and handed it to him. Inteb called loudly, and at once a grimy boy ran up, took the ring and the bowl, and started for the tavern after more wine.

“Not the best!” shouted Inteb to him. “Get the sour—they’ll give you more of it.” He looked at me again reflectively. “A warrior need not write, only fight. If he could write, he would be an officer with command over the most valiant, whom he would send before him into battle. Anyone who can write is fit for command, but a man who cannot scribble pothooks will never have even so many as a hundred under him. What joy can he take in gold chains and honors when it is the fellow with the reed pen in his hand who gives the orders? Thus it is, and thus it will be—and so, my lad, if you would command men and lead them, learn to write. Then those with the gold chains will bow down before you, and slaves will carry you in a chair to the field of battle.”

The dirty boy came back with a jar of wine and had the bowl full as well. The old man’s face shone with joy.

“Your father Senmut is a good man. He can write, and he tended, me in my palmy days when wine was plentiful and I used to see crocodiles and hippopotamuses where none were. A good man, though he is only a doctor and cannot handle a bow. He has my thanks.”

I stared nervously at the wine jar to which Inteb plainly meant to turn his full attention and began to tug at my father’s wide, drugstained sleeve, fearful lest so much wine might result in our waking bruised and beaten, in some gutter. Senmut looked at the jar also, sighed a little, and led me away. Inteb lifted up his shrill old voice in a Syrian song while the naked, sun-blackened boy laughed.

So I buried my martial dreams and no longer resisted when my father and mother took me next day to school.

My father could not afford to send me to any of the big temple schools where the sons—and sometimes daughters—of rich men, nobles and eminent priests were taught. My teacher was the old priest Oneh who lived not far away and held classes on his tumbledown veranda. His pupils were the children of artisans, merchants, dock foremen, and noncommissioned officers whose ambition sought to open a scribe's career for their sons. Oneh had in his time been steward to the Celestial Mut in the temple and was therefore well fitted to give elementary writing lessons to children who later on would be keeping tally of merchandise, measures of grain, head of cattle, or provisions for the army. There were hundreds of such little schools in the great city of Thebes. Instruction was cheap, the pupils merely having to maintain the teacher. The charcoal seller's son replenished his brazier in winter, the weaver's son kept him in clothes, the corn chandler's boy saw that he never ran short of flour, and my father treated his many aches and pains and gave him herbal anodynes to take in his wine.

His dependence upon us made Oneh a gentle teacher. A boy who fell asleep over his tablets never had his ears boxed; he had but to filch some titbit for the old man next morning. Sometimes the corn merchant's son would bring a jug of beer. On such days we were all attention, for old Oneh would be inspired to tell us strange stories of the other world: of the Celestial Mut, of the Creator, of Ptah and his companion gods. We would giggle, believing that we had distracted him from our difficult task and wearisome writing characters for the rest of the day; it was only later that I perceived old Oneh to be a wiser teacher than we took him for. There was a purpose in his recital of the legends to which his pious, childlike spirit gave life: they taught us the traditions of ancient Egypt. In them no evil deed went unpunished. Relentlessly each human heart was weighed before the high throne of Osiris. The mortal whose evil deeds were disclosed upon the scales of the Jackal-Headed One was thrown to the Devourer who was crocodile and hippopotamus combined, but more terrifying than either.

He told also of the surly Backward-Gazer, that dread ferryman without whose help no one could attain the fields of the blessed. When he rowed, he faced aft, never forward like the earthly boatmen on the Nile. Oneh would make us repeat by heart the phrases with which this being might be bribed and propitiated. He taught us to copy them out and then write them down from memory, correcting our faults with the gentle warning that the smallest error would wipe out all chance of a happy life in the hereafter. Were we to hand the Backward-Gazer a letter containing even a trivial mistake, we should be forced to wander like shadows for all eternity by the banks of those somber waters or, worse still, be engulfed in the hideous abysses of the realms of death.

I attended Oneh's school for some years. My best friend there was Thothmes, who was a year or so older than myself and who had been brought up from infancy to wrestle and to handle horses. His father was leader of a squadron of chariots and wielded a whip of office braided with copper wire: he had hopes that his son might become a high-ranking officer and therefore wished him to learn to write. But there was nothing prophetic about the illustrious name of Thothmes, despite his father's ambitions, for as soon as the boy began his schooling, he ceased to care for javelin throwing and charioteering. He learned his characters easily, and while the other boys struggled grimly with them he drew pictures on his tablets: pictures of chariots, rearing horses, and wrestling soldiers. He brought clay to school, and while the ale jug told stories through Oneh's mouth, he modeled a comic little image of the Devourer snapping with clumsy jaws at a little bald old man whose humped back and pot belly could belong to none other than Oneh. But Oneh was not angry. No one could be angry with Thothmes. He had the broad face and short, thick legs of a peasant, but his eyes held a joyful glint that was infectious, and the birds and beasts he formed from clay with his clever hands delighted us all. I had sought his friendship first because he was soldierly, but the friendship persisted after he had

ceased to show a trace of warlike ambition.

A miracle happened during my school days and happened so suddenly that I still remember the hour as one of revelation. It was a fair, cool day in spring when the air was full of bird song and storks were repairing their old nests on the roofs of the mud huts. The waters had gone down, and fresh green shoots were springing from the earth. In all the gardens seeds were being sown and plants bedded out. It was a day for adventure, and we could not sit still on Oneh's rickety old veranda, where the mud bricks crumbled under one's hand. I was scratching at those everlasting symbols—letters for cutting in stone and beside them the abbreviated signs used for writing on paper—when suddenly some forgotten word of Oneh's, some queer flash within myself, spoke and brought these characters to life. The pictures became a word, the word a syllable, the syllable a letter. When I set picture to picture new words leaped forth—living words, quite distinct from the symbols. Any yokel can understand one picture, but two together have meaning only for the literate. I believe that everyone who has studied writing and learned to read knows what I am trying to say. The experience was to me more exciting, more fascinating than snatching a pomegranate from a fruit seller's basket—sweeter than a dried date as delicious as water to the thirsty.

From that time I needed no urging but soaked up Oneh's learning as dry earth soaks up the floodwaters of the Nile, and I quickly learned to write. In a little while I began to read what others had written, and by the third year I could already spell my way through tattered scrolls and read aloud the instructive fables for the others to write down.

About this time I noticed that I did not look like the rest. My face was narrower, my skin lighter, and my limbs more slender than those of the other lads and of the people among whom I dwelt. But for the difference in dress, hardly anyone could have distinguished me from the boys who were carried in chairs or walked the streets attended by slaves. I was sneered at for this; the corn merchant's son would try to put his arm round my neck and called me a girl until I had to jab him with my styli. He revolted me for he had an evil smell, but I liked to be with Thothmes, who never touched me. One day Thothmes said shyly, "I will model your likeness if you will sit for me."

I took him home, and there under the sycamore he made a likeness of me in clay and scratched the characters of my name upon it with a stylus. My mother Kipa, coming out with cakes for us, was badly frightened when she saw the image and called it witchcraft. But my father said that Thothmes might become artist to the royal household if he could only join the temple school, and jokingly I bowed down before Thothmes and stretched forth my hand at knee level as one does in the presence of distinguished persons. His eyes shone; then he sighed that it could never be, for his father thought it was time he came back to barracks and joined the school for charioteers. He could already write as well as was required of any future officer. My father left us then, and we heard Kipa muttering to herself in the kitchen; but Thothmes and I ate the cakes, which were greasy and good, and we were well content.

I was still happy then.

5

The day came when my father put on his newly washed best robe and set about his neck a broad collar embroidered by Kipa. He went to the great temple of Ammon, though privately he had no love for priests. But nothing ever happened in Thebes or indeed in the whole of Egypt at this time without their help and intervention. They administered justice so that a bold man against whom judgment had

been given by Pharaoh's own court could appeal to them for redress. In their hands lay all instructions for the higher administrative posts. They foretold the height of the flood waters and the size of the harvest and from this assessed the taxes for the whole country.

I do not think it can have been easy for my father to humble himself before them. All his life he had been a poor man's physician in the poor man's quarter—a stranger to the temple and the House of Life—and now like other penniless fathers he had to wait in line outside the administrative department until it should please some holiness or other to receive him. I can see these poor fathers now, squatting in the temple courtyard in their best robes, dreaming ambitious dreams for their sons, for whom they coveted a better existence than their own. Many of them had come a long way on river boats, carrying their food with them. They spent their substance on bribes to doorkeeper and clerk for the privilege of a word with a gold-embroidered, perfumed, and anointed priest, who wrinkled his nose at the smell of them and gave them harsh words. And yet—Ammon stands in continual need of new servants. The greater his wealth and power, the greater the numbers of scribes he wears out in his service. However there is not a father who does not regard it as a divine favor for his son to be received into the temple—ay, though in bringing the boy he brings a gift more precious than gold.

My father was fortunate in his visit, for noon had scarcely passed when his old fellow student Ptahor came by. In the course of time Ptahor had become skull opener to Pharaoh's household. My father ventured to address him, and he promised to honor our house in person and inspect me.

The day being fixed, my father saved up for a goose and the best wine. Kipa baked—and nagged. The delicious odor of goose fat floated out into the street till blind men and beggars gathered there to smell and play for their share of the feast. Kipa, hissing with rage, charged out with a bit of bread dipped in the fat for each of them and sent them packing. Thothmes and I swept the street from our door far into the city. My father had asked Thothmes to be at hand when the guest came, in the hope that he also might be favored with the great man's attention. Boys though we were, when my father lit the censers and set it to perfume the entrance way, we felt as awestruck as if we had been in a temple. I guarded the can of scented water and kept the flies off the dazzling white linen cloth Kipa had set aside for her own burial, but which was now brought forth as a towel for Ptahor.

We had long to wait. The sun set, and the air grew cooler. The incense in the porch all burned away and the goose sizzled sorrowfully in the roasting pit. I grew hungry, and Kipa's face lengthened and stiffened. My father said nothing but would not light the lamps when darkness fell. We all sat down on stools in the porch and avoided one another's eyes, and it was then I learned what bitter grief and disappointment the rich and mighty in their thoughtlessness can bring upon the poor.

But at last there came the glow of a torch along the street. My father jumped up and hastened to the kitchen for an ember to light both the lamps. I raised the water pitcher in trembling hands while Thothmes breathed heavily beside me.

Ptahor, the opener of royal skulls, arrived unpretentiously in a chair borne by two Negro slaves and preceded by a fat torchbearer who was evidently drunk. With puffings and cheerful cries of greeting Ptahor stepped from the chair to hail my father, who bowed and stretched forth his hands at knee level. The guest laid his hands on Senmut's shoulders, either to show him that ceremony was needless or to steady himself. Thus supported he kicked at the torchbearer and told him to sleep it off under the sycamore. The Negroes, without waiting for orders, dumped the chair in the acacia bushes and squatted on the ground.

Still leaning on my father's shoulder, Ptahor stepped into the porch, where I poured water over his

hands despite his protests. When I handed him the linen cloth, he said that as I had rinsed his hands might now dry them. When I had done this, he thanked me and said I was a handsome boy. My father led him to the seat of honor—a chair with a back, borrowed from the spice merchant—and he sat down, his inquisitive little eyes peering about him in the light of the suet lamps. For a time there was silence. Then, clearing his throat apologetically, he asked for something to drink as the long journey had made him dry. My father, delighted, poured out wine for him. Ptahor sniffed at it and tasted suspiciously, then emptied the cup with evident enjoyment and gave a contented sigh.

He was a bowlegged, shaven-headed little man with a breast and belly that sagged beneath the thick robe. His collar, set with precious stones, was now soiled like the rest of his dress, and he smelled of oil, wine, and sweat.

Kipa served him with spice cakes, small fish fried in oil, fruit, and roast goose. He ate politely though it was clear that he had just come from a good meal, and he tasted and praised every dish to Kipa's great delight. At his desire I took beer and food to the Negroes, but they returned the courtesy by shouting insults and asking whether old swagbelly was ready to go. The servant snored beneath the sycamore, and I had no wish to wake him.

The evening grew extremely confused, as my father, too, drank more than I had ever seen him drink so that at last Kipa, sitting in the kitchen, was overcome with woe and sat rocking back and forth with her head in her hands. When the pitcher was empty, they drank father's medicinal wine. When that was gone, they started upon ordinary table beer; for Ptahor assured us that he was not particular.

They talked of their student days in the House of Life, swaying and embracing each other as they sat. Ptahor related his experiences as royal skull surgeon, affirming that it was the last branch in which any physician should specialize, being more suited to the House of Death than the House of Life. But there was little work attached to it, and he had always been lazy, as Senmut the Tranquil would certainly remember. The human head—except for the teeth, ears, and throat, which required their own specialists—was in his view the simplest thing to study, and so he had chosen it.

“But,” said he, “if I had had any decency I should have remained what I was: an honest physician bringing life to his patients. As it is, my lot is to deal out death when kinsfolk grow weary of the old and the incurable. I should be like you, friend Senmut—poorer perhaps, but leading a more honest, a more wholesome life.”

“Never believe him, boys!” said my father—for Thothmes was sitting with us now and held a small wine cup in his hand. “I am proud to call Pharaoh's skull borer my friend; in his own line he is the most highly skilled in all Egypt. Do I not remember the prodigious trepanning operations by which he saved the lives of mighty and humble alike and astonished the world? He releases evil spirits that drive men to madness and takes their round eggs from men's brains. Grateful patients bestow gold and silver upon him, chains and drinking cups.”

“But grateful kinsfolk have done more,” put in Ptahor thickly. “For if by chance I heal one in ten or one in fifteen—no, let us say one in a hundred—so much more certain is the death of the others. Have you heard of a single Pharaoh who lived three days after his skull had been opened? No, the mad and incurable are put under my flint knife—and the richer and more illustrious, the quicker they come. My hand releases men from pain, divides inheritances—land, cattle, and gold—my hand raises Pharaohs to the throne. Therefore they fear me, and none dares speak against me, for I know too much. But when knowledge increases sorrow, and I am a most unhappy man!”

Ptahor wept a little and blew his nose on Kipa's shroud.

“You are poor but honest, Senmut,” he sobbed. “Therefore, I love you, for I am rich and rotten—rotten—a lump of ox dung upon the road.”

He took off his jeweled collar and hung it about my father’s neck, and then they began to sing songs whose words I could not understand though Thothmes listened with interest and told me that ripe songs were not to be heard even in barracks. Kipa began to weep loudly in the kitchen. One of the Negroes came over from the acacia bushes, lifted Ptahor in his arms and would have carried him to his chair, for it was long after bedtime. But Ptahor struggled and uttered pitiful cries, called upon the watchmen to help him and vowed that the Negro meant murder. As my father was of no help, Thothmes and I drove the Negro off with sticks until he flew into a rage and went, swearing violent and taking comrade and chair with him.

Ptahor now emptied the beer jug over himself, asked for oil to rub on his face, and tried to bathe in the pool. Thothmes whispered to me that we ought to get the old men into bed, and so it came about that my father and the royal skull surgeon fell asleep on Kipa’s bed with arms about each other’s necks, slobbering oaths of eternal friendship to the last.

Kipa wept and tore her hair and sprinkled herself with ash from the roasting pit. I was tormented by the thought of what the neighbors would say, for the roaring and racket had sounded far and wide in the still night. Thothmes was placid, however, for he had seen wilder doings in barracks and in his father’s house when the charioteers talked of the old days and of the punitive expeditions into Syria and the land of Kush. He contrived to quiet Kipa, and after we had cleared away the traces of the feast as best we could, we, too, went to bed. The servant snored on beneath the sycamore, and Thothmes lay down beside me in my bed, put his arm about my neck, and talked about girls for he also had drunk wine. But I found this wearisome, being a year or two younger than he, and soon fell asleep.

Early in the morning I was awakened by bumping and sounds of movement in the bedroom, and on entering I saw my father still sound asleep in his clothes with Ptahor’s collar about his neck. Ptahor was sitting on the floor holding his head in his hands and asking in a woeful voice where he was.

I greeted him respectfully and told him that he was still in the harbor quarter, at the house of Senmut the physician. This quieted him, and he asked for beer in the name of Ammon. I pointed out to him that he had emptied the beer jug over himself, as his robe testified. He then rose, drew himself up with a dignified frown, and went out. I poured water over his hands, and he bowed his bald head with a groan, bidding me pour water over that, too. Thothmes, who had also awakened, brought him a can of sour milk and a salt fish. When he had eaten, he grew more cheerful. He went out to the sycamore where the servant lay sleeping and began to beat him with his stick till the fellow woke and stood up, his garment stained from the grass and his face earthy.

“Miserable swine!” cried Ptahor and smote him again. “Is it thus you mind your lord’s affairs and bear the torch before him? Where is my chair? Where is my clean robe? And my medicinal berries? Out of my sight, contemptible thief and swine!”

“I am a thief and my lord’s swine,” said the servant meekly. “What are my lord’s commands?”

Ptahor gave him his orders, and he went off to look for the chair. Ptahor settled himself comfortably under the sycamore, leaned against the trunk, and recited a poem concerning morning, lotus flowers, and a queen bathing in the river, and then related to us many things that boys love to hear. Kipa meanwhile awoke, lit the fire, and went in to my father. We could hear her voice right out in the garden, and when my father emerged later in a clean robe, he looked sorrowful indeed.

“You have a handsome son,” said Ptahor. “He carries himself like a prince, and his eyes are gentle.”

as a gazelle's." Young as I was, I understood that he spoke thus to make us forget his behavior of the night before. After a while he went on, "Has your son talent? Are the eyes of his soul as open as those of his body?"

Then Thothmes and I fetched our writing tablets. The royal skull surgeon, gazing abstractedly in the topmost branches of the sycamore, dictated a little poem, which I still remember. It ran thus:

*Rejoice, young man, in thy youth,
For the throat of age is filled with ashes
And the body embalmed smiles not
In the darkness of the grave.*

I did my best, first writing it down in ordinary script and then in pictures. Lastly I wrote the words "age," "ashes," "body," and "grave" in all the ways in which they can be written, both in syllables and in letters. I showed him my tablet. He found not one mistake, and I knew that my father was proud of me.

"And the other boy?" said Ptahor, holding out his hand. Thothmes had been sitting apart, drawing pictures on his tablet, and he hesitated before handing it over, though there was mirth in his eyes. When we bent forward to look, we saw that he had drawn Ptahor fastening his collar about father's neck, then Ptahor pouring beer over himself, while in the third picture he and my father were singing with their arms round each other's shoulders—such a funny picture that you could see what manner of song it was that they were singing. I wanted to laugh but dared not for fear that Ptahor might be angry. For Thothmes had not flattered him; he had made him just as short and bald and bandy and swagbellied as he really was.

For a long time Ptahor said nothing but looked keenly from the pictures to Thothmes and back again. Thothmes grew a little scared and balanced nervously on tiptoe. At last Ptahor asked, "What do you want for your picture, boy? I will buy it."

Thothmes, crimson in the face, replied, "My tablet is not for sale. I would give it—to a friend." Ptahor laughed.

"Good. Let us then be friends, and the tablet is mine."

He looked at it attentively once more, laughed, and smashed it to pieces against a stone. We all started, and Thothmes begged forgiveness if he had offended.

"Am I wroth with water when it reflects my image?" returned Ptahor mildly. "And the eye and the hand of the draftsman are more than water—for I know now how I looked yesterday, and I do not desire that others shall see it. I smashed the tablet but acknowledge you as an artist."

Thothmes jumped for glee.

Ptahor turned to my father and, pointing to me, solemnly pronounced the ancient oath of the physician: "I will undertake his treatment."

Pointing then to Thothmes he said, "I will do what I can." And, having thus come into doctors' talk again, they both laughed contentedly. My father, laying his hand upon my head, asked, "Sinuhe, my son, will you be a physician like me?"

Tears came into my eyes, and my throat tightened till I could not speak, but I nodded in answer. I looked about me, and the garden was dear to me; the sycamore, the stone-set pool—all were dear to me.

“Sinuhe, my son,” he went on. “Will you be a physician more skilled than I, better than I—lord of life and death and one to whom all, be they high or low, may entrust their lives?”

“Neither like him nor like me!” broke in Ptahor. He straightened himself, and a shrewd glint came into his eye. “A true physician, for that is the mightiest of all. Before him Pharaoh himself stands naked, and the richest is to him one with the beggar.”

“I would like to be a real physician,” I said shyly, for I was still a boy and knew nothing of life nor that age ever seeks to lay its own dreams, its own disappointments, on the shoulders of youth.

But to Thothmes Ptahor showed a gold ring that was about his wrist and said, “Read!”

Thothmes spelled out the characters there inscribed and then read aloud uncertainly, “A full cup rejoiceth my heart.” He could not repress a smile.

“There is nothing to laugh at, you rascal!” said Ptahor gravely. “This has nothing to do with wine. If you are to be an artist you must demand that your cup be full. In the true artist Ptah reveals himself—the creator, the builder. The artist is more than a reflecting pool. Art indeed may often be nothing but flattering water or a lying mirror, yet the artist is more. So let your cup never be less than full, so you may see clearly, and do not rest content with what men tell you. Trust rather to your own clear eyes.”

He promised that I should soon be summoned as a pupil to the House of Life and that he would try to help Thothmes enter the art school in Ptah’s temple, if such a thing were possible.

“But, boys,” he added, “listen carefully to what I say and then forget it at once—or forget at least that it was the royal skull surgeon who said it. You will now fall into the hands of priests; you, Sinuhe, will become one yourself in course of time. Your father and I were both initiated into the lower grade, and no one may follow the physician’s calling without being so initiated. When you come among them, be wary as jackals and cunning as serpents, that you be not blinded and misled. Be outwardly be as harmless as doves, for not until the goal is attained may a man appear as he is. Remember!”

We conversed further until Ptahor’s servant appeared with a hired chair and fresh clothes for his master. The slaves had pawned Ptahor’s own chair at a neighboring brothel and were still sleeping there. Ptahor gave his servant authority to redeem both chair and slaves, took leave of us, assuring my father of his friendship, and returned to the fashionable quarter of the city.

But next day he sent a present to Kipa—a sacred scarab carved from a precious stone, to be placed next her heart beneath the shroud at her burial. He could have given my mother no greater joy, and she forgave him everything and ceased lecturing my father Senmut upon the curse of wine.

BOOK 2

The House of Life

IN THEBES in those days all higher education was in the hands of the priests of Ammon, and it was not possible to study for an important post without a certificate from them. As everyone knows, the Houses of Life and of Death had stood for untold ages within the temple walls, and also the theological schools for priests in the higher grades. That the faculties of mathematics and astronomy should be subordinate to the priesthood can be understood, but when both juridical and mercantile training were taken over, misgivings arose in the minds of the more alert among the educated class that the priests were meddling with matters that concerned Pharaoh and the taxation department alone. Initiation was not, indeed, indispensable to membership in the merchants' and lawyers' guilds, but as Ammon controlled at least a fifth of the land of Egypt, and therefore also of its commerce, those who wished to become merchants on a large scale or enter the administration found it wise to qualify for the lowest grade of priesthood and submit themselves as the faithful servants of Ammon.

Before I might set foot in the House of Life I had to pass the examination for admission to the lowest grade of priesthood in the theological faculty. This took me more than two years, for at the same time I had to accompany my father on his visits to the sick and from his experience gained knowledge that would profit me in my future career. I lived at home as before but had to attend one lecture or another every day.

Candidates for the lowest grade were divided into groups according to the profession they were to follow afterward. We, that is to say those who were to be disciples in the House of Life, formed a group on our own, but I found no close friend among my companions. I had taken Ptahor's warning to heart and kept myself aloof, meekly obeying every order and feigning stupidity when the others jested or blasphemed as boys will. Among us were the sons of medical specialists whose advice and treatment were requited in gold. And there were with us also the sons of country doctors, often older than the rest of us, full-grown, gawky, sunburned fellows who strove to hide their shyness and addressed themselves laboriously to their tasks. There were lads from the lower classes who wanted to rise above their fathers' trade and social level and had a natural thirst for knowledge, but they received the severest treatment of any, for the priests were by nature mistrustful of all who were not content with the old ways.

My caution stood me in good stead, for I soon noticed that the priests had their spies and agents among us. A careless word, a spoken doubt, or a joke among friends soon came to the knowledge of the priests, and the culprit was summoned for examination and punishment. Some were flogged, and some even expelled from the House of Life, which was thenceforth closed to them forever, both in Thebes and in the rest of Egypt.

My ability to read and write gave me a marked advantage over many of my fellows, including some of the older ones. I considered myself ripe to enter the House of Life, but my initiation was delayed. I lacked courage to ask the reason since that would have been regarded as insubordination to Ammon. I frittered away my time in copying out Texts of the Dead, which were sold in the forecourts, and grew rebellious and depressed, for already many of the less talented among my fellows had begun their studies in the House of Life. But under my father's direction I was to gain a better grounding than they, and I have since reflected that Ammon's priests were wise. They saw through me, noted my defiance and my unbelief, and therefore put me to this test.

At last I was told that my turn had come to hold vigil in the temple. I lived in the inner rooms for

week, during which time I was forbidden to leave the precincts. I had to fast and purify myself, and my father hastened to cut my hair and invite the neighbors to a feast in celebration of my maturity. For from this time, being now ripe for initiation—simple and meaningless though the ceremony in fact was—I would be regarded as fully grown, superior to my neighbors and to all other boys of my age.

Kipa had done her best, but to me her honey bread was tasteless, and the mirth and coarse jests of the neighbors were no diversion. In the evening after the guests had gone Senmut and Kipa caught me in sadness, too. Senmut began to tell me the truth about my birth, Kipa prompting when his memory failed, while I gazed at the reed boat above my bed. Its blackened, broken struts made my heart ache. In all the world I had no real father and mother but was alone beneath the stars in a great city. I was perhaps, but a miserable foreigner in the land of Kem or my origin a shameful secret... .

There was pain in my heart when I went to the temple wearing the initiation robe that Kipa, with such care and love, had made for me.

2

There were twenty-five of us young men and boys who were preparing to be received into the temple. When we had bathed in the temple pool, our heads were shaved and we put on coarse clothes. The priest appointed as our director was not so pettily meticulous as some. Tradition entitled him to subject us to every kind of humiliating ceremony, but there were some among us of high rank and others who had already taken their law examination—full-grown men who were entering Ammonite service to make their future more secure. These had brought plentiful provisions with them and made the priests presents of wine; some even ran off at night to the pleasure houses, for initiation held no meaning for them. I served with an aching heart and with many bitter thoughts in my mind, contenting myself with a piece of bread and a cup of water—the traditional diet for novices—and waiting with mingled hope and foreboding for what was to come.

For I was so young that I had an unspeakable longing to believe. It was said that Ammon himself appeared at the initiation and spoke individually to each candidate; it would have been ineffable comfort to find release from myself in the awareness of some ultimate and universal purpose. Before the physician even Pharaoh stands naked; already as a child I had seen sickness and death at my father's side, and my eye had been trained to greater keenness than others of my age possessed. To the doctor nothing must be too sacred, and he bows to nothing but death; that my father taught me. Therefore, I doubted, and all that I had seen in the temple during those three years had only deepened my unbelief.

Yet I hoped that behind the veil in the dimness of the holy of holies I should find the Unknown, that Ammon would appear to me and bring peace to my heart.

I was musing upon this as I wandered along the colonnades to which laymen had access. I surveyed the colorful sacred pictures and the inscriptions that told of the stupendous gifts the Pharaohs had brought back to Ammon from the wars, as the god's share of the spoils. And there I met a lovely woman whose robe was of linen so transparent that her breasts and loins might be seen through it. She was straight and slender, her lips, cheeks, and eyebrows were colored, and she looked at me with unabashed curiosity.

“What is your name, you handsome boy?” she asked, her eyes lingering upon the gray should

cloth that showed me to be a candidate for initiation.

“Sinuhe,” I answered in confusion, not daring to meet her gaze; but she was so beautiful that I hoped she would ask me to be her guide about the temple. Such requests were often made to the novices.

“Sinuhe,” she repeated thoughtfully, surveying me. “Then you must be easily frightened and flustered when a secret is confided to you.”

This was an allusion to the Sinuhe of the story, and it annoyed me; there had been enough of the teasing at school. I drew myself up and looked her in the eye, and her glance was so strange and clear and searching that I felt my face beginning to burn and a flame seemed to be running over my body.

“Why should I fear?” I retorted. “A physician-to-be dreads no secrets.”

“Ah,” she smiled, “the chick has begun to cheep before it has cracked the shell. But tell me, have you among your comrades a young man named Metufer? He is the son of Pharaoh’s master builder.”

It was Metufer who had filled the priest with wine and given him a gold bracelet as initiation present. I felt a pang as I told her that I knew him and offered to fetch him. Then it struck me that she might be his sister or some other kinswoman; this cheered me and I smiled at her boldly.

“How am I to fetch him, though, when I do not know your name and cannot tell him who has seen me?”

“He knows,” returned the woman, tapping the pavement impatiently with her jeweled sandal. I looked at the little feet, unsoiled by dust, and at the beautiful toenails lacquered bright red. “He knows who it is. Perhaps he owes me something. Perhaps my husband is on a journey, and I am waiting for Metufer to come and console me in my grief.”

My heart sank once more at the thought that she was married, but I said briskly, “Very well, fetch him, unknown! I will fetch him. I will say that a woman younger and fairer than the moon goddess calls for him. He will know then who it is, for whoever has seen you once can never forget you.”

Scared at my own presumption I turned to go, but she caught hold of me.

“Why such haste? Wait! You and I may have something more to say to one another.”

She surveyed me again until my heart melted in my breast and my stomach seemed to have slipped down to my knees. She stretched forth a hand heavy with rings and bracelets, touched my head and said kindly, “Is not that handsome head cold, being so newly shaven?” Then softly, “Were you speaking the truth? Do you think I am beautiful? Look more closely.”

I looked at her, and her robe was of royal linen, and in my eyes she was fair—fairer than all the women I had seen—and in truth she did nothing to hide her beauty. I looked at her and forgot the wound in my heart, forgot Ammon and the House of Life. Her nearness burned my body like fire.

“You do not answer,” she said sadly, “and need not. In those splendid eyes of yours I must appear a hag. Go then and fetch the young candidate Metufer, and be rid of me.”

I could neither leave her nor speak, though I knew she was teasing. It was dark between the huge temple pillars. Dim light from some distant stone tracery gleamed in her eyes, and there was no one to see us.

“Perhaps you need not fetch him.” She was smiling now. “Perhaps I should be content if you delight me and take your pleasure with me, for I know of no other to give me joy.”

Then I remembered what Kipa had told me of women who entice handsome boys; I remembered

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