Mika Toimi Waltari

THE EGYPTIAN

Waltari Mika

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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

1

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 their 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 in 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 in 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!

2

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 in 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 it 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 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 did 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.

3

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, 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 all 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, their 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 soughing 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 all 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." So 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 dearly 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 chair 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 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 scalpels, 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, “This 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 its many buildings formed a city within the city. From the tops of the towering pylons floated colored 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 their 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 and 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 diflicult 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 a crocodile's; their fists are gross as crocodile's feet. Only when darkness falls can they crawl to their miserable huts, and their food is a scrap of bread, an onion, and a mouthful of thin, bitter beer. That is 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, a 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 had 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 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 and 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