Name: _____ Date: _____

The Shipwrecked Sailor

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1088 words

More than three thousand years ago in Egypt, a ship came sailing home up the great river Nile. On board was an officer who had been sent far away on the king's business. His voyage had not gone well, and he was afraid. "What shall I say to the king?" he groaned. "He will be angry with me." A wise servant stood beside him, and the servant said, "Let me tell you what once happened to me."

"Do not worry, my lord," said the servant. "We have come safely home, and no one is lost. When you speak to the king, speak calmly and from your heart. Let me tell you of a time when I, too, came back from a voyage with a sad tale to tell, and how everything ended well." The officer listened closely, and so, on the deck of the ship in the golden evening light, the servant began his story.

He had once gone down to the sea in a very big ship, on a mission for the king. Five hundred sailors were on board, the bravest men in Egypt, and all of them were sure that no storm would trouble them. But a wind rose when they were far out at sea, and the waves grew taller and taller, until a great wall of water, taller than a man, rolled over the ship.

The servant had grabbed a plank of wood and held on to it with all his strength. The ship broke up under the waves, and he thought that he was lost. But the same wave that had wrecked the ship carried him along and tossed him up on the sand of a strange island. Exhausted, he lay on the beach, wet and cold and shivering, with no company at all except his own thoughts and the sound of the waves.

For three days he was all alone. At night he slept in the hollow of a tree, and by day he went looking for something to eat. The island was full of good things. There were figs and grapes, berries and melons, fat green leeks, and fish and birds. He ate until he was no longer hungry, and he made a fire. As the smoke rose into the blue sky, he wondered if anyone would ever find him.

Then suddenly he heard a sound like thunder, and the trees shook and the ground trembled, so that he thought a great wave was coming to wash over the island. He uncovered his face and looked, and a snake came gliding toward him. It was as long as a ship, and its body shone as if it had been inlaid with gold. Its eyebrows were as blue as lapis, a deep blue stone. It was beautiful, but the sailor was very afraid.

The snake opened its mouth and spoke. "Who brought you here, little one?" it asked. "Tell me quickly!" But the sailor was so frightened that he could not say a single word, so the snake picked him up very gently in its mouth. It carried him off to its home and set him down again without so much as a scratch. Although he had expected the worst, he was perfectly safe.

Then the snake spoke again, in a kinder voice, and this time the sailor found his tongue. He told about the ship and the storm and the plank and the wave that had carried him ashore. "Do not be afraid," the snake said, "and do not look so sad. You have come to my island because it was meant that you should live. You will be safe here, and there is plenty of everything you need."

Then the snake told him about itself. "I live here with my family," it said. "There are seventy-five of us, brothers and sons and daughters. Once something terrible fell from the sky, and our family was frightened and scattered. So I know what it is to be sad. But when sorrow is over, it is a pleasure to tell about it, and you will not be sad for long."

"You will stay here for four months," said the snake, "and then a ship will come from your own country, with sailors you know. You will go home with them, and you will see your children again, and your wife, and your house, and you will be among your friends." The sailor bowed down before the snake until his forehead touched the ground, because he was so grateful and so happy that he forgot to be afraid at all.

"I will tell the king of Egypt about your greatness," the sailor promised. "I will send you perfume and spices and gifts, and ships laden with the riches of Egypt." The snake laughed gently. "I have no need of your gifts," it said kindly. "I am the lord of the land of Punt, and I have more spices than I can use. And when you leave this island, you will never see it again, for it will sink into the sea."

It all happened just as the snake had said. After four months a ship came sailing over the sea, and when the sailor climbed to the top of a tall tree and looked out, he saw that he knew every one of the men on board. He ran to the snake and told it the news. "Good luck to you," said the snake. "Go home and see your children, and may your name be good in your city. These are my good wishes for you."

Then the snake piled gifts on the beach. There were sweet perfumes and spices, ivory tusks, giraffes and monkeys, and every kind of treasure that the island could offer, and the sailor loaded all of it onto the ship. Then he said goodbye and thanked the snake once more. The ship sailed away, and behind it the island sank slowly into the sea, just as the snake had said, so that no one would ever find it again.

In two months the ship reached Egypt, and the sailor went to the king's palace and presented the king with all the gifts from the island. The king was so pleased that he gave the sailor a fine place among his servants. "So you see, my lord," the servant finished, "trouble passes, and a story told afterward is a pleasure." The officer smiled for the first time in days, and he went to see the king with a lighter heart.

Questions

1. Why did the servant tell the officer his story?

A. To cheer him up before he met the king
B. To pass the time on the river
C. To ask for his help

2. What did the snake do after the servant was too frightened to speak?

A. Picked him up gently and carried him home
B. Swam away
C. Chased him up a tree

3. How long did the sailor have to wait on the island?

A. Four months
B. A single day
C. Ten years

4. The snake said that telling about sorrow is a pleasure once it is over. What does the story suggest?

A. Hard times seem easier to bear once they have passed
B. Snakes can read minds
C. Islands are always safe

5. The ship was "laden" with gifts. What does laden mean?

A. Loaded up
B. Painted
C. Empty

Words to know

voyage: sea trip
lapis: blue stone
inlaid: set in with gems
laden: loaded up
sorrow: sadness

Answer key: The Shipwrecked Sailor

1. A. To cheer him up before he met the king
2. A. Picked him up gently and carried him home
3. A. Four months
4. A. Hard times seem easier to bear once they have passed
5. A. Loaded up