IN ANCIENT EGYPT

The village of Chut was situated alongside the Nile River in the Lower Kingdom lands of Egypt. It was a simple farming area like many others in the year 1249 B.C.

The ruling pharaoh at the time was Ramesses II. He had inherited the throne at age twenty-four from his father, Seti I. Now, at age fifty-four, he was mostly famous for constructing a multitude of statues (largely with his image), as well as many temples and monuments throughout the country. A nation-wide Sed Festival had recently been celebrated to commemorate Ramesses' vigorous thirty years as pharaoh. He had already fathered fifty-two royal sons and forty-eight royal daughters. His capital city, Pi-Ramesses, was located far away from Chut to the north, in the eastern part of the lush Nile Delta. Although no one in Chut had actually seen the divine pharaoh (known to be a direct descendent of the sun god, Ra), it was said that Ramesses was tall and regal, with reddish hair and a noble nose. The people were in total awe of their ruler, in no small part because he was thus far so long-lived, at a time when most Egyptian men died by age thirty-four and most women were dead by age thirty.

Asim and Alika of Chut were proud parents of a fine son, Gyasi, and a charming daughter, Khepri. The happy couple had married when Asim was seventeen and Alika was thirteen. Khepri was four, and their son had just turned five, and would soon be starting school, but he would not be taught to read or write as part of his education. Only 5% of Egyptians could claim the special skill of learning the 6000 most important hieroglyphics -- mostly scribes, engineers, and doctors from the Third Class, and those in the Government Class like high priests, nobles, and court officials. Women and girls, meanwhile, were never educated -- but women in Egypt were legally equal to men, except if they were servants or slaves, the lowest class of society.

Asim's family home was built of sun-dried bricks, with a flat roof made of reeds and palm branches, and it looked just like the houses of his neighbors. As was customary, he and his wife lived with his elderly parents, Sadiki and Ife, while Alika's parents lived a few miles away in another village.

Asim was a farmer who grew millet. His family owned six goats, a faithful ox for plowing, a donkey for traveling, and ten chickens. He also had several date palms, and a small orchard of plum and pomegranate trees. The season of *Akhet* (the annual Nile River flooding, which deposited rich, fertile silt ideal for farming) was recently over. His millet crop was planted and nicely growing, now in the season of *Peret.* In a few months would come the season of harvesting, called *Shemu.* Then the cycle would begin again. Life in general was good for Asim and Alika, its routine dependable and secure.

But on the one day of rest out of ten that constituted the Egyptian work-week, Gyasi wandered into the house after playing with his friends and reported that one of their goats was missing. Asim's whole family went out to search for the animal, but came up empty-handed.

"Maybe she will come back on her own, when she feels the urge for her milking," Asim guessed. The milk of sheep and goats in the village provided the necessary cream, cottage cheese, and butter.

Yet after another day with the goat still missing, Alika started to ask her neighbors if they had seen it. One of her neighborhood friends, Dalila, whispered in confidence that she had noticed a new neighbor named Ur altering the notched ear of a goat. Such unique identification markings helped keep livestock ownership from getting mixed up between neighbors or with other nearby villages.

Alika told her husband the news at the dinner hour with the extended family. It was a typical meal of broiled vegetables, fresh fish, and bread, with figs and grapes for dessert. They ate with their hands or with spoons, because Egyptians never used knives or forks for eating.

Asim's father, Sadiki, counseled his son to carefully investigate the suspicion of Ur as the culprit. His mother, Ife, agreed with her husband.

"The missing goat also has a small dark mole near one of its teats, so you can identify it that way if its ear notch was altered or is in question," Alika reminded her husband. "If the goat is indeed found to be our stolen property, we can then inform the village police and seek justice."

"We must ask the blessings of our ancestors and of the gods before I take action in the morning," Asim solemnly announced. "After all, making a false accusation is a serious matter," he warned.

So all six family members went to their home altar, where tiny clay busts of their ancestors were located, alongside small statues of the main gods: Ra, Seth, Horus, Thoth, Anubis, and Osiris. Although there were 3000 gods and goddesses in the Egyptian pantheon, these were the most venerated by such simple folk. But the statue of the cat goddess, Bastet, was kept in another corner of the house, so as to be near the cozy reed bed of the family's male pet cat, Persa, whose job was to keep the millet fields free of mice and other pests . The entire family humbly prayed aloud, with extended hands and closed eyes.

Before everyone went to bed, however, Khepri complained of a cough and sore throat, so her mother ground up some dates and figs, and mixed it with anise, honey and water for her daughter to drink. Meanwhile, Sadiki complained of a bad headache, so his wife, Ife, recommended rubbing his forehead with a fried catfish. "My own mother swore it works," she proclaimed. Sadiki said he would try her folk remedy in the morning if a catfish could be found. Finally, the family took to their beds. The furnace-like heat of the day had passed, and the night was cool and clear with a pleasing sky-wash of bright stars. With their heads on their adjacent wooden pillows, Asim and Alika whispered softly for a few moments, then kissed each other good-night, as sleep swept over them.

The next morning -- after a breakfast of bread, onions, and sliced melon -- the whole family attended to their teeth before setting to work. Because desert sand grains routinely got into all Egyptian bread, the people's teeth were constantly being worn down, causing cavities and worse. Frayed twigs were used as toothbrushes, and toothpaste was made of a mixture of mineral powder, clay and honey. Alika, Ife, and Khepri next applied darkening kohl paste under their eyes, to help thwart the sun's harsh glare when going outdoors. Most of the men and boys in the village, meanwhile, regularly shaved their heads bald to prevent lice. As for daily clothing, Egyptian women routinely dressed in colorful linen robes called *galabiyas,* while their bare-chested men wore only simple white cotton loincloths.

After pressing his forehead to their carved *Ankh* symbol (for the granting of long life) as he exited his front door, Asim went directly to Ur's house, which was located at the far end of the village of Chut.

Ur -- who lived alone in a somewhat disgusting hovel -- was in his typical foul mood, and was quite guarded in his answers regarding the missing goat. He had recently moved to Chut from another village, and had made no new friends. The man was stout and swarthy, with firm muscles -- but his smell indicated that he badly needed to bathe. Asim demanded to inspect the animal in question. "Or there could be legal trouble," he warned. "Be aware that I have a witness who will testify in court that you were seen changing its ear notch."

When the men arrived at Ur's animal pen, Asim immediately noticed the goat with a subtly mutilated ear, which was still in the act of healing. Next, the farmer knelt down and checked for the small dark mole near the goat's teat that his wife had earlier mentioned. There it was, as expected.

"Well, that proves it, Ur. Will you now confess your crime and make amends, so shall I go to the police?" Asim insisted. But Ur was adamant that the goat was his, so a disgusted Asim left and went right to the village authorities.

Ur was soon arrested, and a public village trial was conducted the next day in the afternoon by a district judge named Terit, who arrived by camel with a scribe and two servants from the larger nearby town of Seph. Ur was bound with his hands tied behind his back, and he was forced to wear a symbolic rope noose loosely hung around his neck to add to his public shaming. In a shaded courtyard, Dalila calmly gave her eyewitness account after Asim had given his detailed testimony. The scribe noted the specifics of the case for the required legal record. The imposing judge, wearing his official black hair wig, was swiftly convinced of Ur's blatant guilt, so he cleared his throat, then spoke loudly for the crowd to plainly hear his pronouncement.

"I won't need to send this case further up to the provincial Vizier, good people of Chut." He turned next to face the convicted criminal. "Ur, I won't throw your bound body into the Nile to be torn apart my crocodiles. Such extreme action is reserved for only the most serious offences. Nor will I cut out your tongue, which would be the punishment if you gave away any military secrets. And I won't cut off your nose to brand you forever as a liar and a thief. But I do sentence you to twenty lashes, and a fine of ten *debens*, which is equivalent to five sacks of grain. And of course, you must return the goat to Asim's family immediately." Thus the wise judge, Terit, ruled, as the village crowd murmured and nodded their agreement.

Egyptian justice was rapid and effective. There were virtually no prisons in the country. The accused were always considered guilty until proven innocent, as any crimes were considered an affront both to the social order and to the very gods themselves. Any witness found to be giving false testimony, likewise, could be sentenced to labor in the brutal granite quarries, or were exiled to the wild wastes of Nubia -- such was the Egyptian importance of truth and honesty.

So in this case, punishment was carried out the next morning, in the public square for all to witness. Ur looked with hatred at Asim as he was being painfully whipped by one of the judge's servants. Ur's back would only be covered with swollen, reddened welts when his sentence was concluded, however, rather than his skin being torn and bloodied using a more sinister kind of whip, as would have occurred if this was his second or worse offense.. Earlier, the thief had sullenly surrendered the required monetary damages to the court, half of which was immediately given to Asim, with the other half going to the State for its trouble. Asim's family goat was also promptly returned, to the special delight of Gyasi and Khepri. The people of Chut knew that justice had been served with fairness, and assumed that village life would now return to normal.

But a month later, Khepri came running out to her father while he was working in his millet fields. She had tears streaming down her cheeks. "Father, come quick! I think Persa is hurt!" He dutifully followed his daughter where she led.

On one of the plum trees in his modest orchard, Asim saw the family's beloved pet cat, Persa -- his tawny body with its black stripes hanging dead from a branch with a crude noose around its neck. Flies were already descending on the feline corpse, as it was fast rotting in the afternoon heat.

"Will he be alright?" Khepri begged her father, with reddened, pleading eyes.

"I'm afraid that he is dead, dear daughter." Asim knelt down and hugged her. "Now go to the house and tell your mother that I will bring Persa back with me. We must next pray to Bastet for Persa's spirit journey to the afterlife. Then, everyone in our family must shave off their eyebrows, as is the customary sign of mourning whenever a pet cat dies. This is done so that our village can know of and sympathize with our grief. Finally, we will bury Persa with a special ceremony. Go now, as I have asked."

After the evening meal, when the extended family had assembled, Sadiki supervised the shaving of everyone's eyebrows, using warm water and a sharp knife. A clay oil lamp had been lit and placed in the corner where the statue of Bastet, the cat goddess, had always been kept -- only now, the sacred figurine had been reverently placed lying down next to Persa's inert body under a fresh cloth. The cat would be buried at sunset that very night, in the family's western-most millet field.

"Who would commit such a horrible act?" Alika demanded. "We have no enemies in Chut, do we?"

Ife was the first to answer.

"I think that it must be Ur. He is the likely villain. He was probably seeking revenge for his recent public shaming and punishment after getting caught trying to steal our goat. Plus, I heard rumors that he had been driven out of his former village because of his bad temper and poor attitude toward others. That is probably why he still has no friends in Chut, and why no woman will have him in marriage," she explained.

"But we have no witnesses, do we? Surely, the crime was done carefully in the dark of night. I cannot go to the police with this unless we have hard facts and more proof. Ur could simply claim that we are unfairly harassing him," Asim added.

So the grieving family was stymied. Gyasi meekly suggested that they should all should pray to the gods and ask the ancestors for further guidance. His mother agreed. "We must move carefully ahead with this," she counseled. "Or matters could escalate and grow even worse."

The days went by with no resolution as to what to do about who killed the beloved cat. But something unexpected entered into Asim's life at this time. It began when his farmer friend and neighbor, Jero, stopped by to share some interesting and unusual news.

"There is a wandering teacher, currently visiting the town of Veris for a few days, who is attracting large crowds with his words. I thought we might ride our donkeys there for a day and listen to what he has to say. It is said that he is very wise and sensible. People also asks him questions and he freely advises them."

"What is the man's name?" Asim inquired.

"I've heard that he simply asks to be called 'Teacher,' " Jero replied. "I don't know where he is from or where he is going to next. But I really think we should journey and listen, and judge him for ourselves."

So after discussing his plans with his wife, Asim and Jero took a two-day supply of food and water and set off on their donkeys for the town of Veris, in the cool of the morning the following day.

Veris was many times larger than Chut, with a similarly larger population, the pair realized when they arrived in the late afternoon. The heat of the day was starting to ease. When they inquired in the marketplace about the whereabouts of the man known as Teacher, they were directed to a high hill out past the north side of town.

Perhaps a hundred people were already there when the two friends arrived -- all men, of course. Everyone was seated on the still warm, rocky and sandy ground. The Teacher was standing and was about to speak. He was under the shade of a lone date palm tree.

The man was stately in appearance, with long brown hair parted down the center and hanging to his shoulders. His brown beard was well-shaped, and probably belonged to a man in his mid-20s. Because most Egyptian men were clean-shaven and wore only loincloths, the crowd rightly assumed that this person had to be from another land, for he wore a long, hooded white cotton robe with a simple cord around his waist. Even from their slight distance away, Asim and Jero could see that the man called Teacher was calm and smiling.

"Where do you come from, Teacher?" a man seated close to the stranger first called out and wanted to know, as the event commenced.

*I come from far, far away...from a place unknown to you. My name is not important. You may call me Teacher. I have come to bring you thoughts of wisdom so that you will enjoy happy and peaceful lives. I have come to this world before and I will come again when I am most needed.*

"How should we rightly live, Teacher?" another man asked.

*You must live with love, mercy, and compassion. You must not kill each other or wage wars. Reject evil and embrace the good. Protect the innocent, care for the sick and the poor and the aged, and be good stewards to the bounties of the Earth. Be truthful and humble and pure of heart. Be gentle and patient with each other. And try to transform any enemies you might be suffering into becoming your friends. It is sometimes difficult, but it is always the right thing to do. Trust me in these things, and let your own heart guide you.*

"Teacher, what are the best gods to worship?" someone next shouted out.

*I know you worship many gods, and you may continue to do so if they bring you some solace and comfort. But know with certainty that there is only One True God who watches over us all. And it is to Him alone that you will one day learn to pray and give thanks to.*

The Teacher answered many more questions, speaking for more than two hours in a beautifully sincere and strong voice, as the sun began to set. The vast sky was transformed into blazing colors of orange, pink, and purple, as a refreshing breeze drifted in from off the Nile. As the evening temperature slowly dropped, the multitude brought forth various cloaks and tunics to cover themselves. The Teacher then dismissed the assembled crowd with a smile, and extended his hands in a kind of benediction.

*I bid all of you go now in peace, good health, and safety. May your women and children likewise be blessed. And always remember to love others as you yourself would wish to be loved.*

Asim and Jero were deeply moved by the Teacher's words. Asim felt drawn to see the mysterious stranger face-to-face, so he asked Jero to wait for him for a moment with the donkeys at the bottom of the hill.

After pausing for a few minutes for other men before him to finish, Asim was at last standing in front of the Teacher. The man was slightly taller than the farmer, and had the most remarkable blue eyes that the simple Egyptian had ever seen. In fact, the Teacher's entire face and being radiated a unique feeling of peace and love.

"Teacher, I would ask your kind advice on a small matter perhaps to you, yet it is a serious matter to me," Asim began. He then told the Teacher about his finding the family's dead cat, and wondered what he should do about the suspected perpetrator. The mysterious stranger listened intently, then spoke.

*You must go to this man, Ur, and tell him that you forgive him. Embrace him with selfless love and sincerity. The shock and surprise will open his heart. Then all will be well.*

The Teacher briefly touched Asim on his cheek with his warm hand in conclusion and gently smiled. A powerful new sensation coursed through the Egyptian farmer's body -- a feeling of pure trust and understanding, and complete reassurance, perhaps even a glimpse of eternity...

He thanked the remarkable stranger and gave a bow of respect, then rejoined his friend, Jero. They found a nearby place to sleep for the night, using the cloaks they had brought as blankets for warmth as they ate some food and talked. Asim told him what he had asked the Teacher about.

"That is an interesting solution, but a hard course of action. Do you think you can really do what the Teacher suggested?" Jero wondered.

"I think I'd like to try it," Asim replied, still somewhat in awe as he recalled his amazing personal encounter with the Teacher.

The pair arrived home in Chut the following day in the late afternoon and bid each other goodnight. Asim told his waiting wife and the rest of his family exactly what had happened in Veris and what he intended to try.

The next day, after breakfast, Asim kissed Alika and his children and left immediately to speak with Ur at his ramshackle, dirty-strewn house on the far end of the village. Naturally, the man was wary and suspicious. No one ever visited him unless it was to complain about something or to cause some kind of problem. Ur reluctantly let Asim inside, but he covertly grabbed a foot-long, thick wooden club as a weapon just in case and held it behind his back where his visitor couldn't see it.

Asim took a deep breath, then told how he had found his pet cat, Persa, hung dead from a plum tree on his property. Ur looked nervous and instantly guilty, and his face began to sweat. He clutched the wooden club tightly behind his back, ready to strike if necessary.

But Asim went on to tell about his unique encounter with the Teacher in Veris, and how the mysterious stranger had spoken of forgiveness and mercy and many other sensible things.

"So," Asim concluded after taking another deep breath, "I freely forgive you, Ur, for what wrongs you may have done to me. And I offer you now my honest friendship." The millet farmer then embraced a startled Ur, who dropped his wooden club to the floor behind him in surprise. At the same instant, Asim felt his own heart lifted in profound joy and peace.

Ur began to tremble and broke down into tears. "Yes, I did it...I was still angry at you even though I was wrong to steal your goat. And I was wrong to kill your cat. Forgive me, please!" he sobbed. "I swear by Ra that will bring you two new cats tomorrow, and I will even gift you a new ox to help your other ox with the plowing. I promise to be a faithful friend and neighbor, Asim, and a good member of our community from this day forward. Thank you for giving me another chance. I will be a new man from now on," Ur concluded, wiping his wet cheeks and eyes after grabbing a nearby soiled rag.

Asim returned to his home and eagerly related his success. And the village of Chut was astonished at how much Ur had changed when he visited his new friend -- bringing first, two new cats, and later, a strong, new ox. Ur had been reformed, as Asim had been reborn. Soon, the respected millet farmer began sharing the lessons he had learned from the mysterious Teacher -- who, it was later discovered, had already left the Egyptian town of Veris, walking alone, for lands unknown...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

November 23, 2021