

The Eloquent Peasant

Translated by R. B. Parkinson in *The Tale of Sinuhe and other ancient Egyptian poems, 1940-1640 BC* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997), pages 58-75.

Once there was a man
called Khunanup;
he was a peasant of the Salt Valley,
whose wife was called Meret.
And this peasant said to this wife of his,
'Look, I am going down to Egypt
to buy provisions there for my children.
Go and measure for me
the grain which is left in the storehouse from yesterday.'
And he measured out for her six gallons of grain.
And this peasant said to this wife of his,
'Look, twenty gallons of grain are given to you
and your children for provisions.
But you shall make these six gallons of grain
into bread and beer
for every day, for me to live on.'

This peasant then went down to Egypt,
having loaded his asses with reeds and fan-palms,
natron and salt,
sticks from . . .tiu
and staffs from Farafra,
leopard skins
and wolf hides,
pebbles and serpentine,
wild mint-plants and *inbi*-fruits,
tebu- and *uben*-plants,
—with all the fair produce of the Salt Valley.

This peasant then went
south to Heracleopolis.
He then arrived
in the area of Fefi's Estate, north of Mednit.
There he met a man, called Nemtinakht,
standing on the riverbank.
He was the son of a gentleman called Isry;
they were liegemen of the High Steward
Meru's son Rensi.

And this Nemtinakht, when he saw this peasant's asses
which tempted his heart, said,
'If only I had some effective charm,
with which to steal this peasant's belongings!'
Now the house of this Nemtinakht was on the water-edge, which was a path.
It was narrow; it was not broad,
but only as wide as a kilt.
One of its sides was under water,
and the other under grain.
And this Nemtinakht said to his follower,
'Go bring me a sheet from my house!'
It was brought immediately.
Then he spread the sheet on the water-edge pathway.
And its fringe rested on the water,
with its hem on the barley.
And this peasant came on the public path.
And this Nemtinakht said, 'Take care, peasant!
Will you tread on my clothes?'
And this peasant said, 'I'll do as you wish; my way is good.'
He then went upwards.
And this Nemtinakht said, 'Will my barley be your path?'
And this peasant said, 'My way is good,
for the bank is high and the way under barley,
and you block our path with clothes.
Won't you even let us go past the path?'

Then one of the asses took a mouthful
from a clump of barley.
And this Nemtinakht said, 'Look, peasant, I will take your ass,
for eating my barley,
and it will tread grain for its offence.'
And this peasant said, 'My way is good;
one clump is destroyed—
one destroying ten!
For ten units I bought my ass
and you seize it for a mouthful
of a clump of grain!
Now, I know the lord of this estate;
it belongs to the High Steward Meru's son Rensi.
Now, he punishes every robber in this entire land.
Am I robbed in his estate?'
And this Nemtinakht said, 'Isn't this

the proverb that people say—
"A wretch's name is uttered only because of his master"?
It's the High Steward you recall,
but I'm the one who speaks to you.'

Then he grabbed a stick of fresh tamarisk-shrub.
Then he beat all his limbs with it,
and his asses were taken, and entered into his estate.
And this peasant now wept very much,
for the pain of what was being done to him.
And this Nemtinakht said, 'Don't raise your voice, peasant,
or, look, you're for the harbour of the Lord of Silence!'
And this peasant said, 'You beat me and steal my belongings?
And then you'll rob my mouth of complaint?
O Lord of Silence, may You give me back my belongings,
so I shan't cry out to Your fearsomeness!'
And this peasant spent a full week
petitioning this Nemtinakht, but he paid no attention.

This peasant then went
to Heracleopolis to petition
the High Steward Meru's son Rensi.
He met him coming out
of the door of his house,
about to board his official barge.
And this peasant said, 'Might I acquaint you with this complaint!
There is a reason to send one of your choice followers
to me, about which I shall send him back to you.'
And the High Steward Meru's son Rensi sent
a choice follower to him,
and this peasant sent him back
about this matter in every detail.
And the High Steward Meru's son Rensi
accused this Nemtinakht to the officials who were with him.

And they said to him, 'Surely it's only a peasant of his
who's run off to someone else.
Look, this is what people do to their peasants
who run off to others.
Is there cause to punish this Nemtinakht
for a little natron,
and a little salt?
Order him to repay it, and he'll repay it.'

The High Steward Meru's son Rensi
was then quiet.
He answered neither the officials,
nor the peasant.

*

And this peasant came to petition
the High Steward, Meru's son Rensi,
and said, 'High Steward, my lord!
Great of the great,
leader of all that is not and all that is!

If you go down to the Sea of Truth,
you will sail on it with true fair wind;
the bunt will not strip off your sails, nor your boat delay;
nor will misfortune come upon your mast, nor your yardarms break;
you will not go headlong, and be grounded;
nor will the flood carry you off;
nor will you taste the river's evil, nor stare in the face of fear.
But to you the fish will come caught;
you will catch fatted fowl.

For you are a father to the orphan
and a husband to the widow,
a brother to the divorced,
an apron to the motherless.
Let me make your name in this land, with every good law:
Leader free from selfishness!
Great one free from baseness!
Destroyer of Falsehood! Creator of Truth!
Who comes at the voice of the caller!

I speak so that you will hear.
Do Truth, praised one whom the praised praise!
Drive off my need—look, I am weighed down!
Examine me—look, I am at a loss!

*

Now this peasant made this speech
in the reign of the Majesty of the Dual King Nebkaure, the justified.
The High Steward Meru's son Rensi

then went before his Majesty
and said, 'My lord, I have found one of the peasants,
whose speech is truly perfect, and whose goods have been stolen.
And, look, he has come to me to appeal about it.'

And his Majesty said, 'As you wish to see me in health
you shall delay him here,
without answering anything he says!
For the sake of his speaking, be quiet!
Then we shall be brought it in writing, and we shall hear it.
But provide sustenance for his wife and children!
Look, one of these peasants only comes
to Egypt when his house is all but empty.
Also, provide sustenance for this peasant himself!
You shall have the provisions given to him
without letting him know that you are giving him them!'

And he was given ten loaves of bread,
and two jars of beer daily.
The High Steward Meru's son
Rensi gave them—
gave them to his friend, and his friend gave them to him.
Then the High Steward Meru's son Rensi sent
to the mayor of the Salt Valley
about making provisions for this peasant's wife,
three gallons daily.

*

And this peasant came to appeal to him a second time,
and said, 'High Steward, my lord!
Greatest of the great!
Richest of the rich!
Whose great ones have one greater!
Whose rich, one richer!
Helm of heaven!
Beam of earth!
Plumbline bearing the weight!
Helm, drift not!
Beam, tilt not!
Plumbline, go not wrong!
For a lord great through taking what is ownerless
is now robbing someone, while your share is in your house.'

One jar of beer and three loaves of bread—
what else need you give out to satisfy your dependents?
A mortal must die with his underlings.

Will you then be a man of eternity?
Yet is this not wrong?—the scales tilting,
the weight wandering
the truly upright man turned aside?
Look, Truth flees from under you,
exiled from its place;
the officials are doing evil;
the standard of speech
is now partial,
and the judges snatch when it carries things off—
this means that he who twists speech from its rightness
makes himself go wrong thereby;
the breath-giver is now at a loss on the ground;
he who breathes calmly makes people pant;
the apportioner is greedy,
the dispeller of need is the commander of its making,
and the harbour is its own flood;
the punisher of wrong does evil.'

And the High Steward Meru's son Rensi said,
'Are your belongings more important to you
than my follower's seizing you?'
And this peasant said, 'And the measurer of heaps now defrauds for himself;
the measurer for others now despoils his surroundings;
the lawful leader now commands theft -
who then will beat off wretchedness
when the dispeller of infirmity is going wrong?
One man is exact about being crooked;
another acclaims the evildoer. Do you not profit yourself thus?'

The redress is short, the evil long;
yet good character returns to its place of yesterday.
This is an ordinance: Act for the man who acts, to cause him to act.
This is thanking him for what he does;
this is parrying a thing before shooting;
this is commissioning something from a master craftsman.
O for a moment that destroys,
downfall in your bird-nets,
loss in your fowl,

waste in your marsh-birds!
For the watcher has turned out blind,
the hearer deaf,
the leader a misleader!

You depositary! Have you not gone too far?
Why do you act against yourself so?
Look, you are mighty, powerful,
your arm active, your heart selfish, and mercy has passed you by!
How miserable is the poor man you destroy!
For you are like the messenger of the Crocodile god.
Look, you surpass the Lady of Plague;
what is not for you is not for her;
what not against her, not against you;
you shall not act, she shall not!
A lord of bread should be merciful, whereas might belongs to the deprived;
theft suits one without belongings,
when belongings are snatched by the deprived;
but the bad act without want—should it not be blamed? It is self-seeking.

You, however, are sated with your bread,
drunk with your beer;
you are rich with all things.
The steersman faces forward,
yet the boat drifts as it wills.
The king is within the palace,
and the steering-oar is in your hand,
yet evil is placed all around you.
Long is the appealer's task, profound the divide;
"What's up with him?" will be said.
Give shelter so that your shore will be sound, for look, your harbour is swarming with
crocodiles!
Be your tongue righteous, so that you will not stray;
that limb of a man is his bane.

Do not speak falsehood! Beware the officials!
Those hearers and winnowers are a basket,
but their fodder is speaking falsehood,
so that it seems a light concern for their hearts.
Sage of all men,
do you ignore only my affairs?
You who take care of all at sea -
look, I am under way, but boatless!

Bringer to land of all who drown—rescue the wrecked,
for I am anguished at your very side!

*

And this peasant came to appeal to him a third time
and said, 'High Steward, my lord!
You are a Sungod, lord of heaven, with your entourage.
Everyone's portion is with you, like a flood.
You are a Nileflood who revives the water-meadows, and restores the ravaged
mounds.
Punisher of the robber, protector of the poor—
become not a torrent against the applier!

Take heed of eternity's approach! Wish to endure,
as is said, "Doing Truth is the breath of life".
Deal punishment to the punishable!
May your standard never be equalled!
Do the scales wander?
Is the balance partial?
And is the god of justice lenient? If so, then you should do evil!

You should reveal yourself as the twin of these three!
If the three are lenient, then you can be lenient.
Do not answer good with bad!
Do not put one thing in another's place!
Or speech will grow, even more than weeds,
to reach the smeller with its answer.
The man who waters evil to make deception grow—
this is three times to make him act.
Steer according to the sail!
Remove the torrent to do Truth!
Beware turning back while at the tiller!
Maintaining earth's rightness is doing Truth.
Speak not falsehood, for you are great!
Be not light, for you are weighty!
Speak not falsehood, you are the scales!
Stray not, you are the standard!
Look, you yourself are the very scales:
if they tilt, then you can tilt.
Drift not, but steer!
Rescue with the tiller-rope!
Seize not, but act against the seizer!

A selfish great one is not truly great.
But your tongue is the plummet;
your heart is the weight;
your lips are its arms.
So if you disregard the fierce, who will beat off wretchedness?

Look, you are a wretched washerman,
a selfish one who destroys friendship,
and forsakes his faithful companion for his client—
anyone who comes and supplies him is his brother.
Look, you are a ferryman who ferries only fareholders,
a doer of right whose righteousness is flawed.
Look, you are a storehouse keeper,
who does not let someone in penury escape a debt.

Look, you are a hawk to the folk,
who lives on the wretched birds.
Look, you are a butcher
whose joy is slaughter, without feeling any of the carnage.
Look, you are a shepherd—
is it not a wrong for me that you cannot reckon?
If not, then you can create loss—a predatory crocodile,
a shelter which has abandoned the harbour of the whole land!

Hearer, you do not hear!
So why do you not hear?
Is it because the predator has today already been beaten off for me?
The crocodile retreats?
What use for you is this?
The mystery of Truth will be revealed, and Falsehood cast down on the ground!
Do not plan tomorrow before it comes; the evil in it cannot be known!

*

Now the peasant spoke this speech
to the High Steward Meru's son Rensi
at the entrance of the portico.
Then he set two attendants on him with whips.
Then they beat all his limbs with them.

And this peasant said, 'So shall Meru's son still err,
his face blind to what he sees,
and deaf to what he hears,

his heart straying from what is recalled to him.
Look, you are a town without a mayor,
like a generation without a great man,
like a boat with no controller,
a gang without a leader.
Look, you are an officer who steals,
a mayor who's bribed,
a district-overseer who should beat off the plunderer
but has become an archetype for the evildoer.'

*

And this peasant came to appeal to him a fourth time;
he met him coming out of the gate
of the temple of the god Herishef, [city-god?]
and said, 'O praised one, may Herishef
from whose temple you have come, praise you!

Destroyed is goodness, it has no unity,
and nothing can hurl falsehood to the ground.
Has this ferry not gone down? So who can be taken across,
when crossing is made hateful?
Crossing the river on foot -
is that a good crossing? No!
So who now can sleep till dawn?
For destroyed is going by night
and travelling by day,
and making a man attend his good true right.
Look, it is no use to tell you this,
for mercy has passed you by: how miserable is the poor man you destroy!

Look, you are a hunter who slakes his desire,
who reaches out and does what he wants,
who harpoons hippopotami and shoots wild bulls,
catches fish and snares fowl.
Yet none hasty-mouthed is free from recklessness;
none light of heart is cautious of intent.
Your heart should be patient, so that you will know Truth!
Suppress your choice for the good of him who would depart quietly!
No rapid man cleaves to excellence; no hasty-hearted man will exist.

Stretch out to act, now your eyes are opened!
Inform the heart!

Be not harsh because you are powerful, so that evil may not reach you!
Pass over a misdeed, and it will be two.
Only the eater tastes;
so the accused replies.
Only the sleeper sees the dream;
so the punishable judge
is an archetype for the evil-doer.

Fool, look now you are caught!
Ignoramus, look you are accused!
Bilge-baler, look you are noticed!
Helmsman, do not mis-steer your ship!
Lifegiver, let not die!
Destroyer, let not perish!
Shade, be not sun-blaze!
Shelter, let not the crocodile seize!
A fourth time appealing to you! Shall I continue all day?'

*

And this peasant came to appeal to him a fifth time
and said, 'High Steward, my lord!
The netter is catching the *mehyt*-fish,
the angler killing the Comer-fish,
the fish-spearer harpooning the *ubbu*-fish,
and the trawler is after the *paqru*-fish.
So the catchers *ravage* the river.

Look, you are like them!
Do not rob a wretch of his belongings!
Helplessness—you know what it is:
a pauper's belongings are his breath;
taking them is suffocating him.

You were appointed to hear cases,
to judge contenders, to punish the thief.
Look, your way is to weigh for the robber.
You are trusted—and are become a misleader.
You were appointed as a dyke for the pauper—
beware lest he drown!
Look, you are his lake, you who drag under!'

*

And this peasant came to appeal to him a sixth time,
and said, 'High Steward, my lord!
A lord diminishes Falsehood, and creates Truth,
creating all goodness, and destroying evil!
Like the coming of satisfaction, ending hunger,
and clothes, ending nakedness;
like the sky's calm after high wind, which warms all the cold;
like fire which cooks the raw;
like water which quenches thirst!
See for yourself:
the apportioner is robbing,
the appeaser making suffer,
the perfecter making anguish!

Making any defect lessens Truth:
so measure well!
For Truth has not been damaged, nor has overflown.
If you acquire, then give to your brother,
for jawing is devoid of right.
My sorrow leads only to separation;
my accusation brings departure:
what is in the heart is unknowable.
Be not remiss: you should act with a view to report!
You divide—who will then reconcile?
For the helmstaff is in your hand, like a pole to open a way
when mischance befalls at sea.
But if the boat goes down it is robbed;
its load perishes on the ground on every shore.

You are educated; you are skilled;
you are privileged—but not for robbing!
You act the same as everyone;
your surroundings are awry, you who should be right!
Defect-maker of the whole land!
For now the gardener of wretchedness
is watering his plot with bad,
to make his plot grow with falsehood,
to water the evil of the entire estate.'

*

And this peasant came to appeal to him a seventh time,
and said, 'High Steward, my lord!

You are the helm of the whole land.
The land sails as you command.
You are the twin of the god of justice,
the judge without partiality.

Lord, may you endure,
that a man may be summoned for his true right!
Be not quarrelsome: it is not for you!
The confident man becomes miserable—
do not scheme for what has not yet come,
do not rejoice in what has not yet happened!
Patience extends friendship,
destroying an evil deed which has occurred.
What is in the heart is unknowable.
The law-hacker, the standard-destroyer—
there is no wretch whom he has plundered still living.
Has Truth not addressed him?
Now, my body is full, my heart laden,
and what comes from my body due to its state
is the breach of a dyke, whose waters have flown out,
as my mouth opens to speak.
So, I have now plied my pole, baled out my water,
unloaded what was in my body, washed my soiled clothes!
My plaint is done, all my wretchedness ended before you—
what more do you want from me?

Your neglect will mislead you,
your selfishness befool you,
your greed create you foes,
but will you find another peasant like me?
Or will the negligent man, now a pleader, stand
waiting at the door of his house?

There is none quiet whom you made speak,
none sleeping whom you roused,
none obtuse whom you enlightened,
none shut of mouth whom you opened,
none ignorant whom you made wise,
none foolish whom you educated.
Officials are men who beat back evil, they are lords of goodness,
they are craftsmen of creation, who can rejoin a severed head!

*

And this peasant came to appeal to him an eighth time,
and said, 'High Steward, my lord!
One falls far for greed.
The selfish man is free from success;
his success belongs to failure.
You are selfish—it is not for you;
you steal—it is not right for you,
you who should make a man attend his good true right!
In fact, your portion is in your house, and your belly is full,
while the grain-measure brims over and overflows
so that its excess perishes on the ground.

Seizer of the robbed, taker!
The officials who were appointed
to outlaw evil
are a shelter for the predator—
those very officials who were appointed
to outlaw Falsehood!
Yet your fearsomeness does not make me appeal to you; you do not perceive my
heart.
The quiet man who turns to complain to you -
he does not fear the man he supplicates,
though no brother of his can be summoned against you out of the street.
Your plots of land are in the country,
your wealth in the estate,
your provisions in the storehouse!
Officials are giving to you,
and yet you are *still* taking. So are you not a thief?
—even when people are ushered in before you,
and troops are with you, for the division of land-plots!

Do Truth for the Lord of Truth,
whose justice is just!
Pen, roll, palette of the god of justice,
may you avoid doing evil! Only the pure goodness of the good man is good beyond
him.
But Truth itself is for eternity.
It will descend to the cemetery with its doer;
he is entombed, earth joins with him;
but his name is not effaced on earth.
He is remembered for his goodness.
It is the standard of God's word.
If it is scales, it tilts not;

if a balance, it is not partial.
Look, I will come, or look, another will come,
so that you will make accusation; but do not respond
by accusing a quiet man, nor attack one who cannot!
You do not pity, nor suffer, nor yet destroy!
You do not repay me for this perfect speech,
which comes forth from the mouth of the Sungod himself!
So speak Truth! Do Truth!
For it is mighty, great, enduring.
Its revelation will be found good, it will conduct to blessedness!

Can the scales tilt, when theirs are the pans which weigh things?
There cannot be excess for the standard.
A vile deed cannot reach harbour,
nor the cargo-bearer landfall.'

*

And this peasant came to appeal to him a ninth time,
and said, 'High Steward, my lord!
The tongue of men is their balance;
and scales are what detect deficiency,
dealing punishment to the punishable: let the standard be like you!

Even when its portion exists, Falsehood sallies forth,
but Truth turns back to confront it;
Truth is the property of Falsehood,
which makes it flourish, but Falsehood has never been gathered in.
If Falsehood sets out, it will stray;
it cannot cross in a ferry, and has not altered its course.
He who is rich with it has no children,
and no heirs on earth.
And he who sails with it cannot touch land,
his boat cannot moor in its harbour.

Be heavy no more, you have not yet been light!
Delay no more, you have not yet been swift!
Be not partial! Do not listen to the heart!
Do not disregard one you know!
Do not blind yourself against one who looks to you! Do not fend off a supPLICATOR!

You should abandon this negligence, so that your sentence will be renowned!
Act for him who acts for you

and listen to none against him,
so that a man will be summoned according to his true right!
There is no yesterday for the negligent,
no friend for him who is deaf to Truth,
no holiday for the selfish.
The accuser becomes wretched,
more wretched than when a pleader,
and the opponent becomes a murderer.
Look, I am pleading to you, and you do not hear -
I will go and plead about you to the god of the dead.'

*

And the High Steward Meru's son Rensi
sent two attendants to turn him back.
And this peasant was afraid, thinking this was done
to punish him for the speech he had made.
And this peasant said, 'The thirsty man
approaching water,
the nursing reaching his mouth
for milk—they die,
while for him who longs to see it come,
death comes slowly!'

And the High Steward Meru's son Rensi said,
'Don't be afraid peasant!
Look, you will be dealing with me.'
And this peasant swore an oath,
'So, must I live on your bread,
and drink your beer for ever?'
And the High Steward Meru's son Rensi said,
'Now wait here and hear your petitions!'
And he caused every petition to be read out
from a fresh roll according to its content.
And the High Steward Meru's son Rensi had them presented
before the Majesty of the Dual King Nebkaure, the justified.
And they seemed more perfect to his heart
than anything in this entire land.
And his Majesty said, 'Judge yourself, Meru's son!'

And the High Steward Meru's son Rensi
sent two attendants to bring this Nemtinakht.
Then he was brought, and an inventory made of his household.

Then he found six persons, as well as his [family]. . . ,
his barley, his emmer,
his donkeys, his swine, and his flocks.
And this Nemtinakht was given to this peasant,
with all his property, all his servants,
and all the belongings of this Nemtinakht.

*So it ends, from start to finish,
as found in writing.*