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*A Ghost Story From Egypt*  
Paul V.M. Flesher

A few years ago, during a visit to Egypt, I visited the tombs in the Valley of the Kings, the Pyramids, the mastaba burial chambers, and the temples the ancient Egyptians used for conveying the dead to the next world. Not surprisingly, I began to think that Egyptian religion was focused on death and the afterlife. I was sure of it when I was shown the 50-foot wooden boat assembled from pieces buried near the Giza Pyramids. Its intended use? To ferry the dead to their next life. I started wishing to see something about life and happiness. So when the opportunity arose to visit the old Jewish synagogue of Cairo, I jumped at the chance.

I was so excited about seeing the synagogue that I did not notice the area the guide took me through to get there. The synagogue itself was quite fascinating, but that is another story. On the way back to the tour bus, I took more interest in my surroundings, and immediately began to get nervous. At first, I thought my nervousness was due to the fact that we were the only people on the streets. The streets were clean, dusty, yet totally deserted. What made this more strange was we were in Cairo, where the sidewalks are so crowded you could lift your feet up and let the crush of people carry you forward, and where the buses are so crowded people hung outside from the windows. The lack of people here was definitely strange.

The hair on my neck began to rise when I realized that the houses showed no signs of life. From the number of buildings around us, this seemed to be a populous area. There were many one-story family dwellings, most had a stone wall around their small yard, and they seemed to be in a fairly good state of repair. Through a few windows I could see a table here or a chair there, so they were not empty. They were just devoid

of human life. The further we walked through this city, the more I strained to see people, on the street or in the houses. The emptiness continued.

And then I noticed the silence, the birds and animals also were missing. No chirping or bird songs, only the distant roar of the Cairo streets, somewhere beyond where we were. A hush settled on the group. Suddenly, through a window, I saw a cat. A thin, emaciated cat, with its skin stretched tightly over its skull. It darted quickly from view, but not before I could see it had one red eye and one yellow eye, the only parts of it that looked alive.

Finally, as we neared the bus, the guide provided an explanation. We were walking through Cairo's famous "City of the Dead," its cemetery. In Cairo, the wealthier inhabitants had purchased family plots in the cemetery, buried their dead in the ground, and then built houses above the crypt. The living relatives would visit their dead by coming to the house. Once or twice a year, large numbers of relatives would gather in the house and have a party, a party in which, they believed, the spirits of the deceased took part.

So the modern City of the Dead was a way of connecting the living and the dead, of providing the dead with a place to live, much like the ancient Egyptians had tried to provide their dead with the things of a new life. So despite the heavy Muslim character of Egypt, religious practices that preceded Islam's rise by millennia continued.