

***HENDRIK WILLEM  
VAN LOON***



***THE STORY  
OF MANKIND***

**Hendrik Willem van Loon**

# **The Story of Mankind**

**Illustrated**

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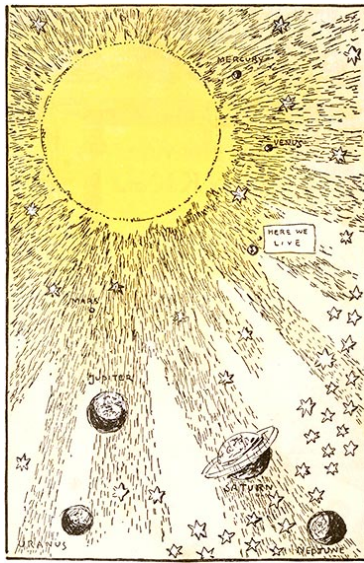
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THE SCENE OF OUR HISTORY IS LAID UPON A LITTLE PLANET, LOST IN THE VASTNESS OF THE UNIVERSE.

BY  
HENDRIK VAN LOON

To JIMMIE  
“What is the use of a book without pictures?” said Alice.



# FOREWORD

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For Hansje and Willem:

WHEN I was twelve or thirteen years old, an uncle of mine who gave me my love for books and pictures promised to take me upon a memorable expedition. I was to go with him to the top of the tower of Old Saint Lawrence in Rotterdam.

And so, one fine day, a sexton with a key as large as that of Saint Peter opened a mysterious door. “Ring the bell,” he said, “when you come back and want to get out,” and with a great grinding of rusty old hinges he separated us from the noise of the busy street and locked us into a world of new and strange experiences.

For the first time in my life I was confronted by the phenomenon of audible silence. When we had climbed the first flight of stairs, I added another discovery to my limited knowledge of natural phenomena — that of tangible darkness. A match showed us where the upward road continued. We went to the next floor and then to the next and the next until I had lost count and then there came still another floor, and suddenly we had plenty of light. This floor was on an even height with the roof of the church, and it was used as a storeroom. Covered with many inches of dust, there lay the abandoned symbols of a venerable faith which had been discarded by the good people of the city many years ago. That which had meant life and death to our ancestors was here reduced to junk and rubbish. The industrious rat had built his nest among the carved images and the ever watchful spider had opened up shop between the outspread arms of a kindly saint.

The next floor showed us from where we had derived our light. Enormous open windows with heavy iron bars made



the high and barren room the roosting place of hundreds of pigeons. The wind blew through the iron bars and the air was filled with a weird and pleasing music. It was the noise of the town below us, but a noise which had been purified and cleansed by the distance. The rumbling of heavy carts and the clinking of horses' hoofs, the winding of cranes and pulleys, the hissing sound of the patient steam which had been set to do the work of man in a thousand different ways — they had all been blended into a softly rustling whisper which provided a beautiful background for the trembling cooing of the pigeons.

Here the stairs came to an end and the ladders began. And after the first ladder (a slippery old thing which made one feel his way with a cautious foot) there was a new and even greater wonder, the town-clock. I saw the heart of time. I could hear the heavy pulsebeats of the rapid seconds — one — two — three — up to sixty. Then a sudden quivering noise when all the wheels seemed to stop and another minute had been chopped off eternity. Without pause it began again — one — two — three — until at last after a warning rumble and the scraping of many wheels a thunderous voice, high above us, told the world that it was the hour of noon.

On the next floor were the bells. The nice little bells and their terrible sisters. In the centre the big bell, which made me turn stiff with fright when I heard it in the middle of the night telling a story of fire or flood. In solitary grandeur it seemed to reflect upon those six hundred years during which it had shared the joys and the sorrows of the good people of Rotterdam. Around it, neatly arranged like the blue jars in an old-fashioned apothecary shop, hung the little fellows, who twice each week played a merry tune for the benefit of the country-folk who had come to market to buy and sell and hear what the big world had been doing. But in a corner — all alone and shunned by the others — a big black bell, silent and stern, the bell of death.

Then darkness once more and other ladders, steeper and even more dangerous than those we had climbed before, and suddenly the fresh air of the wide heavens. We had reached the highest gallery. Above us the sky. Below us the city — a little toy-town, where busy ants were hastily crawling hither and thither, each one intent upon his or her particular business, and beyond the jumble of stones, the wide greenness of the open country.

It was my first glimpse of the big world.

Since then, whenever I have had the opportunity, I have gone to the top of the tower and enjoyed myself. It was hard work, but it repaid in full the mere physical exertion of climbing a few stairs.

Besides, I knew what my reward would be. I would see the land and the sky, and I would listen to the stories of my kind friend the watchman, who lived in a small shack, built in a sheltered corner of the gallery. He looked after the clock and was a father to the bells, and he warned of fires, but he enjoyed many free hours and then he smoked a pipe and thought his own peaceful thoughts. He had gone to school almost fifty years before and he had rarely read a book, but he had lived on the top of his tower for so many years that he had absorbed the wisdom of that wide world which surrounded him on all sides.

History he knew well, for it was a living thing with him. "There," he would say, pointing to a bend of the river, "there, my boy, do you see those trees? That is where the Prince of Orange cut the dikes to drown the land and save Leyden." Or he would tell me the tale of the old Meuse, until the broad river ceased to be a convenient harbour and became a wonderful highroad, carrying the ships of De Ruyter and Tromp upon that famous last voyage, when they gave their lives that the sea might be free to all.

Then there were the little villages, clustering around the protecting church which once, many years ago, had been the home of their Patron Saints. In the distance we could

see the leaning tower of Delft. Within sight of its high arches, William the Silent had been murdered and there Grotius had learned to construe his first Latin sentences. And still further away, the long low body of the church of Gouda, the early home of the man whose wit had proved mightier than the armies of many an emperor, the charity-boy whom the world came to know as Erasmus.

Finally the silver line of the endless sea and as a contrast, immediately below us, the patchwork of roofs and chimneys and houses and gardens and hospitals and schools and railways, which we called our home. But the tower showed us the old home in a new light. The confused commotion of the streets and the market-place, of the factories and the workshop, became the well-ordered expression of human energy and purpose. Best of all, the wide view of the glorious past, which surrounded us on all sides, gave us new courage to face the problems of the future when we had gone back to our daily tasks.

History is the mighty Tower of Experience, which Time has built amidst the endless fields of bygone ages. It is no easy task to reach the top of this ancient structure and get the benefit of the full view. There is no elevator, but young feet are strong and it can be done.

Here I give you the key that will open the door.

When you return, you too will understand the reason for my enthusiasm.

HENDRIK WILLEM VAN LOON.



HIGH up in the North in the land called Svithjod, there stands a rock. It is a hundred miles high and a hundred miles wide. Once every thousand years a little bird comes to this rock to sharpen its beak.

When the rock has thus been worn away, then a single day of eternity will have gone by.

# THE SETTING OF THE STAGE

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We live under the shadow of a gigantic question mark.

Who are we?

Where do we come from?

Whither are we bound?

Slowly, but with persistent courage, we have been pushing this question mark further and further towards that distant line, beyond the horizon, where we hope to find our answer.

We have not gone very far.

We still know very little but we have reached the point where (with a fair degree of accuracy) we can guess at many things.

In this chapter I shall tell you how (according to our best belief) the stage was set for the first appearance of man.

If we represent the time during which it has been possible for animal life to exist upon our planet by a line of this length, then the tiny line just below indicates the age during which man (or a creature more or less resembling man) has lived upon this earth.



Man was the last to come but the first to use his brain for the purpose of conquering the forces of nature. That is the reason why we are going to study him, rather than cats or dogs or horses or any of the other animals, who, all in their own way, have a very interesting historical development behind them.



## IT RAINED INCESSANTLY

In the beginning, the planet upon which we live was (as far as we now know) a large ball of flaming matter, a tiny cloud of smoke in the endless ocean of space. Gradually, in the course of millions of years, the surface burned itself out, and was covered with a thin layer of rocks. Upon these lifeless rocks the rain descended in endless torrents, wearing out the hard granite and carrying the dust to the valleys that lay hidden between the high cliffs of the steaming earth.

Finally the hour came when the sun broke through the clouds and saw how this little planet was covered with a few small puddles which were to develop into the mighty oceans of the eastern and western hemispheres.

Then one day the great wonder happened. What had been dead, gave birth to life.

The first living cell floated upon the waters of the sea.

For millions of years it drifted aimlessly with the currents. But during all that time it was developing certain habits that it might survive more easily upon the inhospitable earth. Some of these cells were happiest in the dark depths of the lakes and the pools. They took root in the slimy sediments which had been carried down from the tops of the hills and they became plants. Others preferred to move about and they grew strange jointed legs, like scorpions and began to crawl along the bottom of the sea amidst the plants and the pale green things that looked like jelly-fishes. Still others (covered with scales) depended upon a swimming motion to

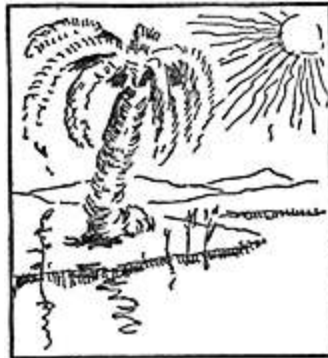
go from place to place in their search for food, and gradually they populated the ocean with myriads of fishes.



THE ASCENT OF MAN

Meanwhile the plants had increased in number and they had to search for new dwelling places. There was no more room for them at the bottom of the sea. Reluctantly they left the water and made a new home in the marshes and on the mud-banks that lay at the foot of the mountains. Twice a day the tides of the ocean covered them with their brine. For the rest of the time, the plants made the best of their uncomfortable situation and tried to survive in the thin air which surrounded the surface of the planet. After centuries of training, they learned how to live as comfortably in the air as they had done in the water. They increased in size and became shrubs and trees and at last they learned how to grow lovely flowers which attracted the attention of the busy big bumble-bees and the birds who carried the seeds far and wide until the whole earth had become covered with

green pastures, or lay dark under the shadow of the big trees.



### THE PLANTS LEAVE THE SEA

But some of the fishes too had begun to leave the sea, and they had learned how to breathe with lungs as well as with gills. We call such creatures amphibious, which means that they are able to live with equal ease on the land and in the water. The first frog who crosses your path can tell you all about the pleasures of the double existence of the amphibian.

Once outside of the water, these animals gradually adapted themselves more and more to life on land. Some became reptiles (creatures who crawl like lizards) and they shared the silence of the forests with the insects. That they might move faster through the soft soil, they improved upon their legs and their size increased until the world was populated with gigantic forms (which the hand-books of biology list under the names of Ichthyosaurus and Megalosaurus and Brontosaurus) who grew to be thirty to forty feet long and who could have played with elephants as a full grown cat plays with her kittens.

Some of the members of this reptilian family began to live in the tops of the trees, which were then often more than a hundred feet high. They no longer needed their legs for the purpose of walking, but it was necessary for them to move quickly from branch to branch. And so they changed a



part of their skin into a sort of parachute, which stretched between the sides of their bodies and the small toes of their fore-feet, and gradually they covered this skinny parachute with feathers and made their tails into a steering gear and flew from tree to tree and developed into true birds.

Then a strange thing happened. All the gigantic reptiles died within a short time. We do not know the reason. Perhaps it was due to a sudden change in climate. Perhaps they had grown so large that they could neither swim nor walk nor crawl, and they starved to death within sight but not within reach of the big ferns and trees. Whatever the cause, the million year old world-empire of the big reptiles was over.

The world now began to be occupied by very different creatures. They were the descendants of the reptiles but they were quite unlike these because they fed their young from the "mammæ" or the breasts of the mother. Wherefore modern science calls these animals "mammals." They had shed the scales of the fish. They did not adopt the feathers of the bird, but they covered their bodies with hair. The mammals however developed other habits which gave their race a great advantage over the other animals. The female of the species carried the eggs of the young inside her body until they were hatched and while all other living beings, up to that time, had left their children exposed to the dangers of cold and heat, and the attacks of wild beasts, the mammals kept their young with them for a long time and sheltered them while they were still too weak to fight their enemies. In this way the young mammals were given a much better chance to survive, because they learned many things from their mothers, as you will know if you have ever watched a cat teaching her kittens to take care of themselves and how to wash their faces and how to catch mice.

But of these mammals I need not tell you much for you know them well. They surround you on all sides. They are

your daily companions in the streets and in your home, and you can see your less familiar cousins behind the bars of the zoological garden.

And now we come to the parting of the ways when man suddenly leaves the endless procession of dumbly living and dying creatures and begins to use his reason to shape the destiny of his race.

One mammal in particular seemed to surpass all others in its ability to find food and shelter. It had learned to use its fore-feet for the purpose of holding its prey, and by dint of practice it had developed a hand-like claw. After innumerable attempts it had learned how to balance the whole of the body upon the hind legs. (This is a difficult act, which every child has to learn anew although the human race has been doing it for over a million years.)

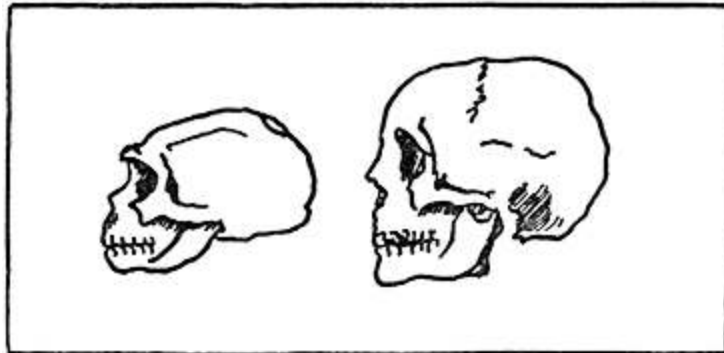
This creature, half ape and half monkey but superior to both, became the most successful hunter and could make a living in every clime. For greater safety, it usually moved about in groups. It learned how to make strange grunts to warn its young of approaching danger and after many hundreds of thousands of years it began to use these throaty noises for the purpose of talking.

This creature, though you may hardly believe it, was your first "man-like" ancestor.

# OUR EARLIEST ANCESTORS

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WE know very little about the first “true” men. We have never seen their pictures. In the deepest layer of clay of an ancient soil we have sometimes found pieces of their bones. These lay buried amidst the broken skeletons of other animals that have long since disappeared from the face of the earth. Anthropologists (learned scientists who devote their lives to the study of man as a member of the animal kingdom) have taken these bones and they have been able to reconstruct our earliest ancestors with a fair degree of accuracy.



THE GROWTH OF THE HUMAN SKULL

The great-great-grandfather of the human race was a very ugly and unattractive mammal. He was quite small, much smaller than the people of today. The heat of the sun and the biting wind of the cold winter had coloured his skin a dark brown. His head and most of his body, his arms and legs too, were covered with long, coarse hair. He had very thin but strong fingers which made his hands look like those of a monkey. His forehead was low and his jaw was like the jaw of a wild animal which uses its teeth both as fork and knife. He wore no clothes. He had seen no fire except the

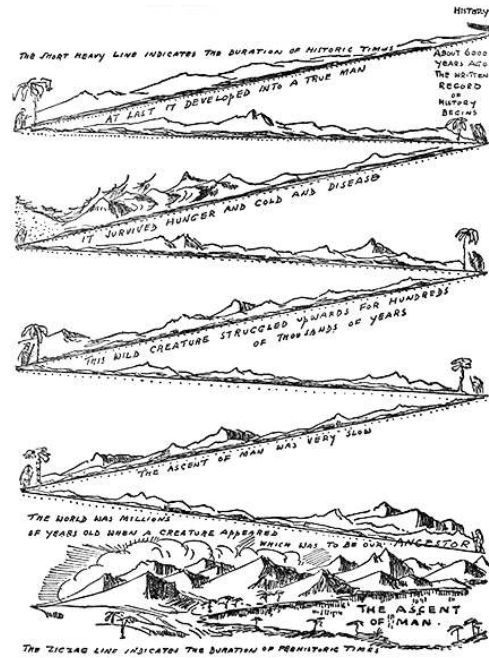
flames of the rumbling volcanoes which filled the earth with their smoke and their lava.

He lived in the damp blackness of vast forests, as the pygmies of Africa do to this very day. When he felt the pangs of hunger he ate raw leaves and the roots of plants or he took the eggs away from an angry bird and fed them to his own young. Once in a while, after a long and patient chase, he would catch a sparrow or a small wild dog or perhaps a rabbit. These he would eat raw for he had never discovered that food tasted better when it was cooked.

During the hours of day, this primitive human being prowled about looking for things to eat.

When night descended upon the earth, he hid his wife and his children in a hollow tree or behind some heavy boulders, for he was surrounded on all sides by ferocious animals and when it was dark these animals began to prowl about, looking for something to eat for their mates and their own young, and they liked the taste of human beings. It was a world where you must either eat or be eaten, and life was very unhappy because it was full of fear and misery.

In summer, man was exposed to the scorching rays of the sun, and during the winter his children would freeze to death in his arms. When such a creature hurt itself, (and hunting animals are forever breaking their bones or spraining their ankles) he had no one to take care of him and he must die a horrible death.



## PREHISTORY AND HISTORY

Like many of the animals who fill the Zoo with their strange noises, early man liked to jabber. That is to say, he endlessly repeated the same unintelligible gibberish because it pleased him to hear the sound of his voice. In due time he learned that he could use this guttural noise to warn his fellow beings whenever danger threatened and he gave certain little shrieks which came to mean "there is a tiger!" or "here come five elephants." Then the others grunted something back at him and their growl meant, "I see them," or "let us run away and hide." And this was probably the origin of all language.

But, as I have said before, of these beginnings we know so very little. Early man had no tools and he built himself no houses. He lived and died and left no trace of his existence except a few collar-bones and a few pieces of his skull. These tell us that many thousands of years ago the world was inhabited by certain mammals who were quite different from all the other animals — who had probably developed from another unknown ape-like animal which had learned to walk on its hind-legs and use its fore-paws as hands — and

who were most probably connected with the creatures who happen to be our own immediate ancestors.

It is little enough we know and the rest is darkness.

# PREHISTORIC MAN

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### PREHISTORIC MAN BEGINS TO MAKE THINGS FOR HIMSELF

EARLY man did not know what time meant. He kept no records of birthdays or wedding anniversaries or the hour of death. He had no idea of days or weeks or even years. But in a general way he kept track of the seasons for he had noticed that the cold winter was invariably followed by the mild spring — that spring grew into the hot summer when fruits ripened and the wild ears of corn were ready to be eaten and that summer ended when sudden gusts of wind swept the leaves from the trees and a number of animals were getting ready for the long hibernal sleep.

But now, something unusual and rather frightening had happened. Something was the matter with the weather. The warm days of summer had come very late. The fruits had not ripened. The tops of the mountains which used to be covered with grass now lay deeply hidden underneath a heavy burden of snow.

Then, one morning, a number of wild people, different from the other creatures who lived in that neighbourhood, came wandering down from the region of the high peaks. They looked lean and appeared to be starving. They uttered sounds which no one could understand. They seemed to say that they were hungry. There was not food enough for both the old inhabitants and the newcomers. When they tried to stay more than a few days there was a terrible battle with claw-like hands and feet and whole families were killed. The others fled back to their mountain slopes and died in the next blizzard.

But the people in the forest were greatly frightened. All the time the days grew shorter and the nights grew colder

than they ought to have been.

Finally, in a gap between two high hills, there appeared a tiny speck of greenish ice. Rapidly it increased in size. A gigantic glacier came sliding downhill. Huge stones were being pushed into the valley. With the noise of a dozen thunderstorms torrents of ice and mud and blocks of granite suddenly tumbled among the people of the forest and killed them while they slept. Century old trees were crushed into kindling wood. And then it began to snow.

It snowed for months and months. All the plants died and the animals fled in search of the southern sun. Man hoisted his young upon his back and followed them. But he could not travel as fast as the wilder creatures and he was forced to choose between quick thinking or quick dying. He seems to have preferred the former for he has managed to survive the terrible glacial periods which upon four different occasions threatened to kill every human being on the face of the earth.

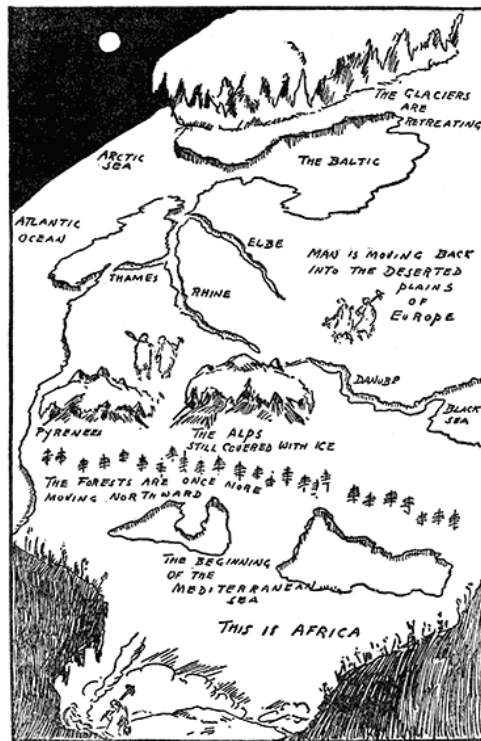
In the first place it was necessary that man clothe himself lest he freeze to death. He learned how to dig holes and cover them with branches and leaves and in these traps he caught bears and hyenas, which he then killed with heavy stones and whose skins he used as coats for himself and his family.

Next came the housing problem. This was simple. Many animals were in the habit of sleeping in dark caves. Man now followed their example, drove the animals out of their warm homes and claimed them for his own.

Even so, the climate was too severe for most people and the old and the young died at a terrible rate. Then a genius bethought himself of the use of fire. Once, while out hunting, he had been caught in a forest-fire. He remembered that he had been almost roasted to death by the flames. Thus far fire had been an enemy. Now it became a friend. A dead tree was dragged into the cave and lighted



by means of smouldering branches from a burning wood. This turned the cave into a cozy little room.



PREHISTORIC EUROPE

And then one evening a dead chicken fell into the fire. It was not rescued until it had been well roasted. Man discovered that meat tasted better when cooked and he then and there discarded one of the old habits which he had shared with the other animals and began to prepare his food.

In this way thousands of years passed. Only the people with the cleverest brains survived. They had to struggle day and night against cold and hunger. They were forced to invent tools. They learned how to sharpen stones into axes and how to make hammers. They were obliged to put up large stores of food for the endless days of the winter and they found that clay could be made into bowls and jars and hardened in the rays of the sun. And so the glacial period, which had threatened to destroy the human race, became its greatest teacher because it forced man to use his brain.

# HIEROGLYPHICS

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### THE EGYPTIANS INVENT THE ART OF WRITING AND THE RECORD OF HISTORY BEGINS

THESE earliest ancestors of ours who lived in the great European wilderness were rapidly learning many new things. It is safe to say that in due course of time they would have given up the ways of savages and would have developed a civilisation of their own. But suddenly there came an end to their isolation. They were discovered.

A traveller from an unknown southland who had dared to cross the sea and the high mountain passes had found his way to the wild people of the European continent. He came from Africa. His home was in Egypt.

The valley of the Nile had developed a high stage of civilisation thousands of years before the people of the west had dreamed of the possibilities of a fork or a wheel or a house. And we shall therefore leave our great-great-grandfathers in their caves, while we visit the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, where stood the earliest school of the human race.

The Egyptians have taught us many things. They were excellent farmers. They knew all about irrigation. They built temples which were afterwards copied by the Greeks and which served as the earliest models for the churches in which we worship nowadays. They had invented a calendar which proved such a useful instrument for the purpose of measuring time that it has survived with a few changes until today. But most important of all, the Egyptians had learned how to preserve speech for the benefit of future generations. They had invented the art of writing.

We are so accustomed to newspapers and books and magazines that we take it for granted that the world has always been able to read and write. As a matter of fact, writing, the most important of all inventions, is quite new. Without written documents we should be like cats and dogs, who can only teach their kittens and their puppies a few simple things and who, because they cannot write, possess no way in which they can make use of the experience of those generations of cats and dogs that have gone before.

In the first century before our era, when the Romans came to Egypt, they found the valley full of strange little pictures which seemed to have something to do with the history of the country. But the Romans were not interested in "anything foreign" and did not inquire into the origin of these queer figures which covered the walls of the temples and the walls of the palaces and endless reams of flat sheets made out of the papyrus reed. The last of the Egyptian priests who had understood the holy art of making such pictures had died several years before. Egypt deprived of its independence had become a store-house filled with important historical documents which no one could decipher and which were of no earthly use to either man or beast.

Seventeen centuries went by and Egypt remained a land of mystery. But in the year 1798 a French general by the name of Bonaparte happened to visit eastern Africa to prepare for an attack upon the British Indian Colonies. He did not get beyond the Nile, and his campaign was a failure. But, quite accidentally, the famous French expedition solved the problem of the ancient Egyptian picture-language.

One day a young French officer, much bored by the dreary life of his little fortress on the Rosetta river (a mouth of the Nile) decided to spend a few idle hours rummaging among the ruins of the Nile Delta. And behold! he found a stone which greatly puzzled him. Like everything else in Egypt it was covered with little figures. But this particular slab of black basalt was different from anything that had

ever been discovered. It carried three inscriptions. One of these was in Greek. The Greek language was known. "All that is necessary," so he reasoned, "is to compare the Greek text with the Egyptian figures, and they will at once tell their secrets."

The plan sounded simple enough but it took more than twenty years to solve the riddle. In the year 1802 a French professor by the name of Champollion began to compare the Greek and the Egyptian texts of the famous Rosetta stone. In the year 1823 he announced that he had discovered the meaning of fourteen little figures. A short time later he died from overwork, but the main principles of Egyptian writing had become known. Today the story of the valley of the Nile is better known to us than the story of the Mississippi River. We possess a written record which covers four thousand years of chronicled history.

As the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics (the word means "sacred writing") have played such a very great rôle in history, (a few of them in modified form have even found their way into our own alphabet,) you ought to know something about the ingenious system which was used fifty centuries ago to preserve the spoken word for the benefit of the coming generations.

Of course, you know what a sign language is. Every Indian story of our western plains has a chapter devoted to strange messages written in the form of little pictures which tell how many buffaloes were killed and how many hunters there were in a certain party. As a rule it is not difficult to understand the meaning of such messages.

Ancient Egyptian, however, was not a sign language. The clever people of the Nile had passed beyond that stage long before. Their pictures meant a great deal more than the object which they represented, as I shall try to explain to you now.


Suppose that you were Champollion, and that you were examining a stack of papyrus sheets, all covered with

hieroglyphics. Suddenly you came across a picture of a man with a saw. “Very well,” you would say, “that means of course that a farmer went out to cut down a tree.” Then you take another papyrus. It tells the story of a queen who had died at the age of eighty-two. In the midst of a sentence appears the picture of the man with the saw. Queens of eighty-two do not handle saws. The picture therefore must mean something else. But what?


That is the riddle which the Frenchman finally solved. He discovered that the Egyptians were the first to use what we now call “phonetic writing” — a system of characters which reproduce the “sound” (or phone) of the spoken word and which make it possible for us to translate all our spoken words into a written form, with the help of only a few dots and dashes and pothooks.



Let us return for a moment to the little fellow with the saw. The word “saw” either means a certain tool which you will find in a carpenter’s shop, or it means the past tense of the verb “to see.”

This is what had happened to the word during the course of centuries. First of all it had meant only the particular tool which it represented. Then that meaning had been lost and it had become the past participle of a verb. After several hundred years, the Egyptians lost sight of both these


meanings and the picture  came to stand for a single letter, the letter S. A short sentence will show you what I mean. Here is a modern English sentence as it would have been written in hieroglyphics.



The  either means one of these two round objects in your head, which allow you to see or it means “I,” the person who is talking.

A  is either an insect which gathers honey, or it represents the verb “to be” which means to exist. Again, it may be the first part of a verb like “be-come” or “be-have.” In this particular instance it is followed by  which means a “leaf” or “leave” or “lieve” (the sound of all three words is the same).

The “eye” you know all about.

Finally you get the picture of a . It is a giraffe. It is part of the old sign-language out of which the hieroglyphics developed.

You can now read that sentence without much difficulty.

“I believe I saw a giraffe.”

Having invented this system the Egyptians developed it during thousands of years until they could write anything they wanted, and they used these “canned words” to send messages to friends, to keep business accounts and to keep a record of the history of their country, that future generations might benefit by the mistakes of the past.