

History of the Art of Writing

In Three Parts, Part 2.
BY KATHERINE SMITH.

Phonograms — The next advancement appeared in the form of rebus or image writing, in which several objects were combined. The form of conundrum called rebus is the simplest form of phonograms. In the rebus the picture of an object is taken to denote any word or part of word which has the same sound as the name of the thing pictured. It is likely that the reason that children like rebus writing is that at about a certain age they, too, as the race has done, pass through this stage of development. If, like the ancient Egyptians, we were to adopt a circle with a central dot as our ordinary symbol of the sun, then we would have a pure ideogram, but if we were to go on and, after the manner of the Egyptians or Chinese, were to use the same symbol to represent the word "son," we would have a phonogram of that primitive type which has repeatedly served to bridge the gap between picture ideograms and phonetic characters. It is thought probable that the adopting of this important step by which the advance was made from ideograms to phonograms arose out of the necessity to express proper names. Phonograms are the graphic symbols of sounds. As a usual thing they have arisen out of conventionalized ideograms which have been taken to represent sounds instead of things. In the case of Chinese characters, we find the most notable instance of a graphic system which has never succeeded in advancing beyond the most rudimentary stage of conventionalized picture-writing. It has been found that when the intricate and queer Chinese characters are traced back to their earliest forms or types, they are found to be conventionalized forms descended from rude pictures to which they now bear little or no resemblance. The Chinese language is a language of roots; it has no terminations to denote easy tense, mood or person; the same word with change of form may be used as a noun, verb, adjective, adverb or participle. It is a monosyllabic language consisting almost entirely of homophones, i. e., the same articulation has to do duty for several widely different words. Hence the use of "key" words, otherwise called radicals or primitive. In the Egyptian and Cuneiform these "keys" are called determinatives. In English one learns which meaning is to be conveyed by the aid of variant spelling, e. g., right, rite, wright, write. In order to be able to write an ordinary business letter in Chinese one would have to commit to memory some six or seven thousand of these groups of characters, hence in China and in the countries not possessing an alphabet few people learn to read and write, and these few are known as the learned caste.

Syllabism — The stage in the progress of writing finds its best illustration in the development of the Japanese out of the Chinese. About the third century, A. D., at about the time of the great eastern extension of the Buddhist faith, the Japanese came into contact with the civilization of China and obtained a knowledge of the characters in which the Chinese literature was written. The Japanese language was polysyllabic, and the Chinese characters, which are verbal phonograms, could only be used for the expression of the polysyllabic Japanese words by being treated as syllable signs. A number of characters sufficient to constitute a syllabary having been selected, it was found that the whole apparatus of "keys" might be rejected. Here, however, the development has stopped. It might seem strange that a people as ingenious as the Japanese would not, during the one thousand years that have elapsed since the introduction of the Chinese characters, develop their syllabary into an alphabet, but we must remember that it is only within the present century that the Japanese have been a trading nation. The fact that such a development has not taken place is sufficient to show that the working out of an alphabetic principle is not as easy or obvious a matter as might be supposed. It might be

noted in passing that now that the Japanese have come in contact with Western civilization and have discovered how convenient and simple the Roman alphabet is, a movement to substitute it for the native syllabary has sprung up.

Authorities who have studied the matter have come to the conclusion that there is a general law governing the advance from one stage in the development of writing to the next. A next higher stage is only attained by transmission of the graphic system from one nation to another. In addition to the example just cited, the transmission of the Aztec to the Mayas of Yucatan, of the Egyptian to the Semites, and the thrice repeated transmission of the Semitic alphabet to the Aryan nations—to the Greeks, to the Persians and the Indians, are facts confirming this general rule. The best example of this general law is found in the case of the repeated transmission of the cuneiform writing. It was invented by the Turanian people, and transmitted to Semitic Aryans and Babylonians, while out of the Semitic cuneiform arose, on one hand, the Turanian Proto-Medic syllabary, and on the other the cuneiform alphabet of the Aryan Persians.

Alphabetic signs or letters represent the elementary sounds into which the syllables can be resolved. The earliest extant inscription in the world is the tablet in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford. M. Matreillis places the date at about 4,700 B. C. It was erected by a king of the second dynasty, and is considered proof that even at that date the hieroglyphic writing was already an extremely ancient graphic system with long ages of previous development stretching out behind it. The Egyptian picture-writing, like every other primitive method of writing, began with picture ideograms, many of which continued to be used the very last. Abstract ideas which could be directly represented, were expressed by means of symbolic pictures, e. g., the battle of two arms, one holding a shield the other a javelin. The next stage must have been that the primitive ideogram gave place to the verbal phonogram and then later these verbal phonograms came to be used as syllabic signs; finally these syllabic signs were continued so as to form compound phonograms, on the principle of the rebus. Egyptian writing also contained alphabetical symbols out of which our alphabet has grown. Alphabetic symbols on the Egyptian monuments go to show that the letters of the alphabet are older than the pyramids, older probably than any other existing monuments of human civilization with the possible exception of the zodiac.

The Babylonian, Assyrians, Medes and the Japanese succeeded in passing only through the syllabic stage which the hieroglyphic records of the Egyptians had already advanced to the great conception of the alphabetic writing.

Symbols for vowel sounds are found in the syllabaries of these nations, but the more difficult conception of the consonant, was not even approached. The notion of a consonant, a sound that cannot be sounded except in conjunction with some other sound, different from itself, is very difficult; it involves the analysis of the syllable into its ultimate phonetic elements. Canon Taylor states, "All that remained to be done was to sweep away the superfluous lumber." This step they never took, but continued to use eye-pictures side by side with that of ear-pictures instead of advancing to the use of fixed signs for certain sounds. Even at the present time we continue to use phonographic and ideographic signs to a considerable extent. The Roman numerals I, II, III, may be regarded as pictures of fingers, and it is probable that V. was at first the picture of the fork of the hand, the fingers collected and the thumb apart so that VV. or X. represents two hands, while IV. and VI. would be a picture of the hand with the subtraction or addition of a finger. Many of the symbols used in technical writing survive to show that even in the midst of the highest European civilization the spirit of the earliest and rudest forms of writing are not extinct.

The Zodiacal and planetary signs used by astronomers are also ideograms. Other ideograms used by us are the crown and broad arrow, sundry trade-marks and armorial bearings, together with several printers' signs. Certain shop signs as the barber pole with its spiral bandage, which is a significant sign of blood letting; the three golden balls of the pawnbroker is a curious survival of the boluses (large pills) which denoted the ancestral calling of the Florentine family of the Medici. In £ s. d. we have characters of alphabetical origin used simply as convenient phonograms standing for the words pounds, shillings and pence. Most of the Arabic numerals are degraded from Semitic letters.

(To be concluded next issue)

THE GREAT ILLUSION.

(Continued from page 1)

its corruption. All that the community had to offer was common right; to all the requirements of life; in all respects a free society.

With barbarism came property right and its corollary, slavery. Came organized religion, organized militarism, organized political society. (for the subjugation of man.) The savage was vanquished by the merchant; the commune broken up by trade. The natural patriotism of the tribesman for his hunting grounds became a weapon for political aggression; the reverence of ancestor-worship became obedience to god ordained rulers; traditional custom, transmitted to individual interest.

In such a society man is a slave. He has no access to the necessities of life. He toils only at the will of another and for the benefit of another. He is bartered—with all his potentialities for gain, and out of all the wealth he created he is thrown a scrap to support his miserable existence for further exploitation. Denied access to the means of life is to be denied satisfaction of the natural functions of life, and the accrued advantages of progress and enlightenment. Hence, as exploitation inevitably entails poverty, so dwarfed natural relations produce vice and depravity, invariably. Whoever holds the means of man's life holds man in bondage. Therefore, so long as political society shall persist, so long must man be enslaved.

From primal necessity comes secondary consequence. Development had to be—it was, (is,) the law of the cosmos—and, taking place, produced class distinctions. But class distinctions are class interests, differing and opposite, and the interest which happens to be dominant can, for a time, regulate the forces of social and ethical progress to its own advantage. But to the disadvantage of others. Hence the class struggle, and revolution. And hence also the confusing variety of interlacing ideas, the overlapping of ancient tradition with modern thought, and the struggle of conflicting philosophies, representing conflicting interests, which, by and through such interests baffles us in our immediate aim, and blind us to fundamental cause.

And truly, we are wedded to strange illusions. We call our shackles "home"; the penury of continuous toil "prosperity"; spoliation, enterprise; greed, incentive; impecunious necessity, thrift.

We call political domination, democracy; exploitation "eternal right"; war, "holy"; our civilization "enlightened." In the densest of ignorance we boast of culture, of virtue, amidst the most appalling corruption. We dub ourselves searchers for truth—and we daily crucify it. With dainty conceit we lay claim to reason—that is no more than self interest; to intelligence—that rises no higher than the impulse, of emotion; to wisdom—unable to distinguish fact from fancy. With silver tongue we preach equality—and practice law; honesty, and accumulate riches; fraternity, and advocate "preparedness." We call commerce, "foreign relations"; lying, "diplomacy"; hypocrisy, "statesmanship"; gnile, "law"; piracy, "glory"; robbery, "success" and the ethic overspreading this festering slough of pollution we call "divine will."

But surely, the illusion of "freedom" is the most astounding of them all. R.