

Handwritten shorthand symbols on a blue-lined background.

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میرے ہاتھ لگنے سے ہر کام

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Stained Glass Story

I recently attended a function in Christ Church, Chislehurst, Kent, and enjoyed admiring the beauty of the stained glass windows. The zoom button on the camera was indispensable but some of the windows are at ground level allowing a close study of the detail. They do, of course, all illustrate Bible characters and events, but it occurred to me that I could make them tell a shorthand story as well, of the encounter between the shorthand writer and the wild beasts of unknown words and outlines.

This window shows Daniel in the lions' den, surrounded by the roaring hungry big cats that would like to attack and make a meal of him. In my story, this is "Dan the Shorthand Man" who has studied his manuscripts well. He has not only learned the rules and advice on how to conduct himself in such circumstances, but he has actually applied them, and is now safe from the claws and teeth of the beastly marauders that threaten to destroy him. He is calm, serene and peaceful, with his mind firmly fixed on higher things. The lions seem to have decided that they had better look elsewhere for dinner, upon which they will pounce with great force as soon as it appears. In the historical account they got their meal the next day, when King Darius ordered brutal justice and retribution to be visited on Daniel's accusers. This same event is illustrated in the realistic and skilful painting "Daniel's Answer To The King" by Briton Rivière in 1890 showing a supremely calm situation in the dungeon the next morning, when King Darius anxiously called down to Daniel to see if he was still alive.

These are the Ten Commandments tablets, showing only the numbers one to ten. They are actually written in a type of shorthand that everyone is familiar with – numerals – so there is no need to inject shorthand meaning here when it is already present. Roman numerals are still the norm for public monuments or for special decorative or classical effect, but in daily life our Arabic numerals are far quicker and easier for our purposes, namely writing mathematical calculations on paper. The Romans used an abacus for calculations, so their writing method was perfectly adequate for just recording the result. The change from Roman to Arabic (originally from India, via Arabia) seems to me to mirror the purpose of shorthand, a cumbersome system of representation replaced by a more swiftly written one, which, once learned, makes it very difficult to return willingly to the previous slow and awkward method. Here are Ten Recommendations for the shorthand student, offered in the spirit of encouraging excellence in your new stenographic skill.

- You shall not dawdle.
- You shall not skip chapters.
- You shall not write longhand.
- You shall not use a blunt pencil or rough paper.
- You shall not neglect the shorthand dictionary.
- You shall practise regularly.
- You shall drill troublesome outlines.
- You shall double-check every transcript for accuracy.
- You shall not expect to stay at your present speed.
- You shall not underestimate your ability to master high speed!

Stained Glass Story

This is the serpent of which Moses was instructed to make a bronze emblem in order to heal his people from snakebites during their time in the desert. The serpent is climbing a cross and has dragon wings to show that it represents Satan. Moses is holding his staff right in the serpent's face, as a reminder of his dominion over the creature. I can almost hear the snake hissing in defiance, and his face is certainly full of snarling displeasure at his present impotence and his impending doom and destruction. In my shorthand story, this is a close-up encounter with one of the beasties that can beset the shorthand writer, the insidious and clinging Hesitation Snake. It winds itself round your shorthand pen, squeezing it tightly and slowing it down. If you shake it off, it takes to its wings, flying along the line of your pad and fastening itself to the next outline that you are having trouble with, magnifying your difficulty, resulting in a cavernous gaping hole in the notes. It turns your hesitation "molehills" into "mountains" and it needs firm and instant action.

There is only one way to deal with the Hesitation Snake and that is to use your mental sword and do the necessary, cutting it out of your mind as soon as it appears. This time you are the fierce lion, and, having successfully removed the foe, you will be confident to use this attitude again the next time it attempts to interfere. Once it becomes a habit to put down intrusive worries before they can cause damage, you can get on with writing in a more comfortable frame of mind. The inscription "Deus Juvat" is Latin for "God helps" and I think the animal is a reference to the Lion of Judah with the sword signifying the Word of God being used in the battles of life. The demeanour of this particular lion is very reminiscent of the lions on royal crests and heraldry of past centuries, where it was a symbol of the monarch's ultimate and often violent authority against all oncomers, not only rivals in war but also any of the populace who dared to challenge the status quo.

Here at last is a representation of the victorious shorthand writer who has overcome all difficulties and is ready to face any future ones. The eagle is king of the birds, master of all it surveys, and is top of the food chain. It possesses expansive wings to swoop down at great speed, silently but surely catching up with its target. It has sharp talons to keep a firm grip on the subject matter under consideration and a strong hooked beak to deal with the item as it sees fit. Its brow appears severe, but I am sure this is a reflection of its audacious character and gritty determination to achieve its goals. The eagle is the emblem of Saint John, and the tiny star above is an example of the Victorians' love of including the maximum amount of narrative in their artwork. It is like the Nativity star, presumably to indicate that John's ministry was to point the way to someone greater than himself.

You have gained your shorthand certificate, written the day's work and produced your transcript without errors, despite the high speed spurts of some of the fast speakers at the meeting. You have been paid for your services and are now resting in your beautiful garden, as peaceful as these happy and well-kept sheep. They have trees for shelter, plenty to eat and a crystal-clear flowing stream to drink from. These sheep are gazing lovingly and trustingly at their Good Shepherd in the next pane. These windows are at low level so you can see all the detail clearly. Their eyes have a human appearance, which allowed the artist to inject emotion and purpose into the animal characters. Their fleeces have been painted in the minutest undulating detail, giving them a soft and cuddly look, just like white teddy bears. As in agricultural shows of today, someone seems to have freshened up and combed these sheep ready for the artist, as the drinking sheep has a very neat parting all down his back!

Stained Glass Story

After all the educational windows showing troubles and victories, here is the magnificent rose window that is pure colour delight, depicting grapevines, with clusters of grapes, leaves, tendrils and flower shapes. If you copy any of these curling branches and shoots, you will gain very good practice in pen control, writing graceful curves at an even rate. Light-handed and smooth flowing writing is one of the keys to gaining and increasing speed. Stiff, slow and halting drawing of the outlines in a heavy-handed manner will only produce furrows in the paper and marks or stains on the reverse, or even worse a bent or splayed nib and a quickly blunting pencil lead. The letters I H S in the centre stand for Jesus, and the twelve petal shapes signify the disciples. At first glance they look like figures in robes with bishops' pointed headgear, but are actually filled with vines whose shoots are tied together at the top with a golden ribbon and continue into the outer ring of floret shapes.

The window faces south to get full sunlight, and the effect of the glorious burst of colour does not seem to be diminished by our familiarity with the intense artificial light sources that we are constantly surrounded by. Congratulations to all those shorthand disciples who ROSE to the challenge during their WINDOW of opportunity, writing at a LIGHTning speed that LEAVES the others behind, and who are now enjoying the FRUITS of their labours and the FLOWERING of their new skill. (1474 words)

Daniel & Lions = Daniel 6 v 1-24
Commandments = Exodus 20 v 10-17
Bronze serpent = Numbers 21 v 6-9
Lion of Judah = Revelation 5 v 5
Sword = Hebrews 4 v 12 and Rev 1 v 16
Good Shepherd = John 10 v 11-18
Eagle = Ezekiel 1 v 10 and Isaiah 40 v 31
Vine = John 15 v 1-8