

Zarafa

A Beautiful Gift for a King

Julia Chalkley

Illustrated by
Jane Ostler







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Edited by
Mark Swan
James White
Alice Aldous





For Margot Holt



Chapter One

It is 1798 and General
Napoleon is
organising a secret
attack on Egypt.
His Grand
Army of the

Orient sets off from four different
Mediterranean ports. Most of his
soldiers do not know where they
are going but they trust their
General completely.

400 ships come together: a floating
city that covers the sea. Only the
soldiers on The Orient, Napoleon's
flagship, know that he is sea-sick for
most of the voyage!

34,000 soldiers land at Alexandria
on the Egyptian coast and
begin their march across
the desert towards the
Mameluke warrior
rulers to fight the Battle
of the Pyramids.



The fearsome Mameluke cavalry all gleaming gold and silver on their splended horses and bristling with pistols and sabres charge Napoleon's army, but they are no match for the army's musketeers who quickly defeat them. Triumphant, Napoleon is handed the keys to the city of Cairo the following day.





Besides his soldiers, Napoleon has also come to Egypt with printing presses, a library of books and 154 clever men, known as his walking encyclopaedia! He is determined to discover everything he can about this ancient kingdom and lead it into the modern world. His year in Egypt is one of the happiest of his life – a time when he rides on camels wearing a turban and eats with his fingers, reclining on silken cushions.

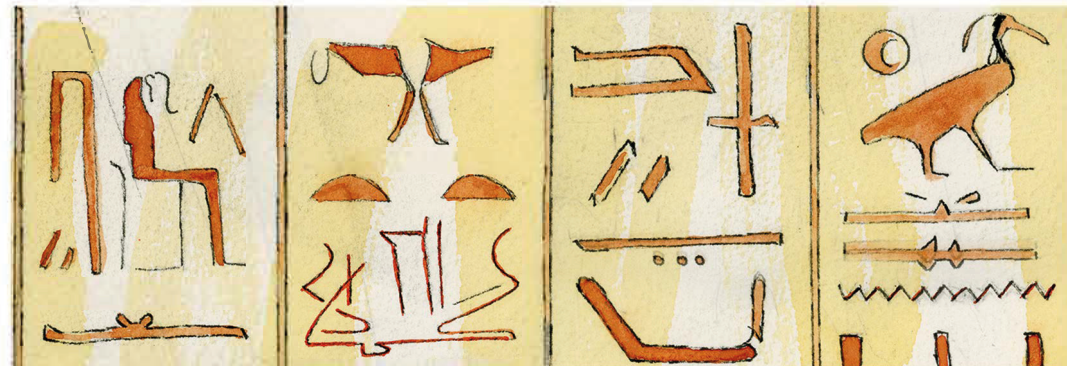
But trouble is brewing: in the Bay of Abukir, close to Alexandria, Rear Admiral Nelson and his British ships sink the French fleet; France is at war with Europe again and Napoleon has to return home.

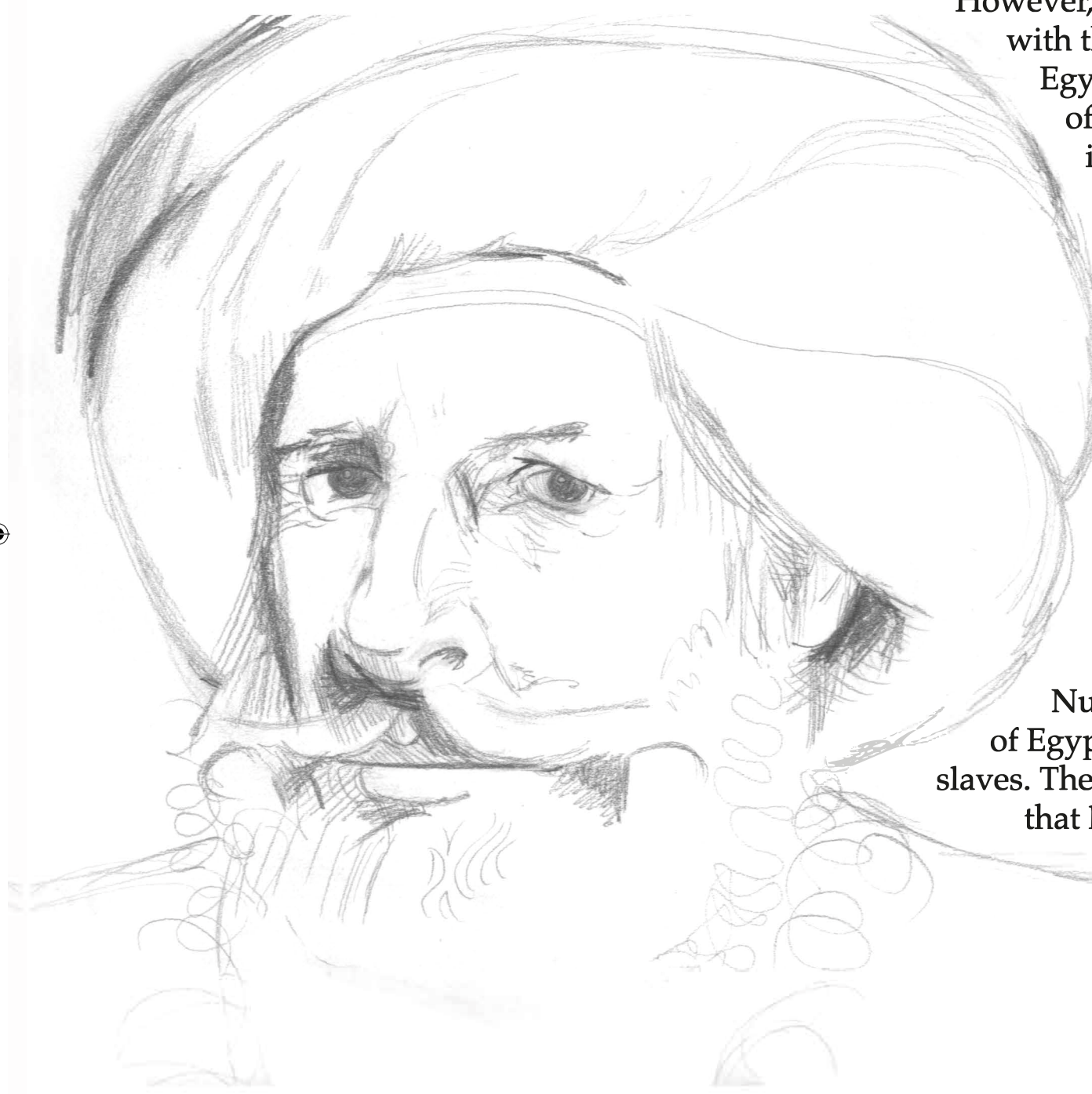


One of his clever men, who will later be a very important part in our story, is Etienne Geoffroy-Saint-Hilaire who created the first city zoo in the world in Paris when he was only twenty-one.

He and the other clever men stay behind when Napoleon leaves and compile a great book which they call the Description of Egypt. It describes everything they discover, from sphinxes and pyramids to how baby crocodiles are hatched from eggs.

Back in France people are so amazed by the books that their excitement becomes known as Egyptomania! A ten year old boy called Jean-Francois Champollion is so inspired that he learns Arabic and when he grows up becomes the first person to understand Egyptian hieroglyphics and tell the world about the history of Egypt.





However, with Napoleon gone, the British join ranks with the Turks of the Ottoman Empire and capture Egypt. One of these Turks is an Albanian junior officer called Muhammed Ali who is pitched into the rough sea before he can land at Abukir and is rescued by British soldiers.

The junior officer becomes head of his army. He is a fearless, cutthroat warlord and in 1805 he is made Pasha of Egypt. Although he cannot read or write he is greatly impressed by everything the clever Frenchmen have discovered and he is determined to continue to modernise and transform Egypt.

The transformation requires great wealth and the Pasha's soldiers conquer the lands of Nubia and Sudan on the river Nile, to the south of Egypt and capture many of the natives to sell as slaves. The lands are laid waste and the wild animals that live there are driven away south to the savannah highlands of Ethiopia, where our story truly begins.

Chapter Two

It is now 1824 and in the savannah highlands a baby female giraffe is born, whose life is to prove the most extraordinary adventure. The Arabic name for giraffe is *zeraffa* meaning 'lovely one'; our giraffe comes to be known as Zarafa.

The Pasha wants to present a rare and wonderful gift to the King of France as a sign of friendship. The first zoo-in-the-world in Paris is also the royal menagerie and the King is keen to expand his collection of exotic animals. The Pasha decides to send him a giraffe.

As Jean-Francois Champollion later discovers, in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics giraffes are drawn as the sign meaning 'foretell' because their large eyes enable them to see as far as a mile into the distance, an early warning system against danger.

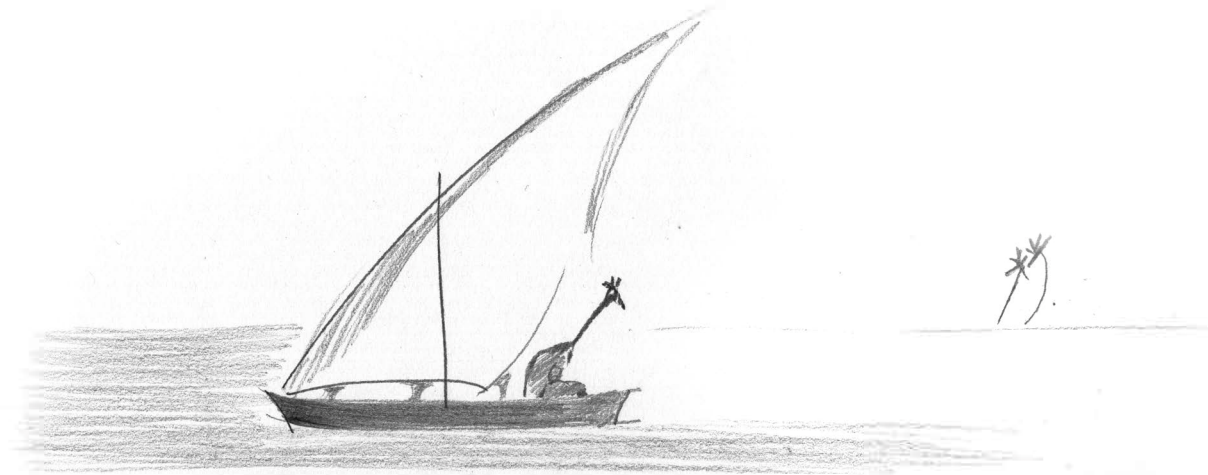


But Zarafa is too small to see the danger and run away fast enough from the hunters sent by the Pasha and they capture her.

The hunters tame her by feeding her camel's milk then strap her to a camel and march her in caravan to the Blue Nile where they board a felucca bound for Khartoum.

Zarafa is carefully looked after in Khartoum until she is big enough to continue her journey 2,000 miles down river to Alexandria.

Cows are on board to produce milk for her now because her keepers know that if they feed her with solid food, she will become too strong for them and try to escape.





In Ancient Egypt Alexandria had been a famous port with a great lighthouse, the Pharos, that was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Napoleon had made it an important place again and now the Pasha lives there. Zarafa stays as his guest in the grounds of his palace overlooking the Mediterranean Sea whilst her journey to France is planned.



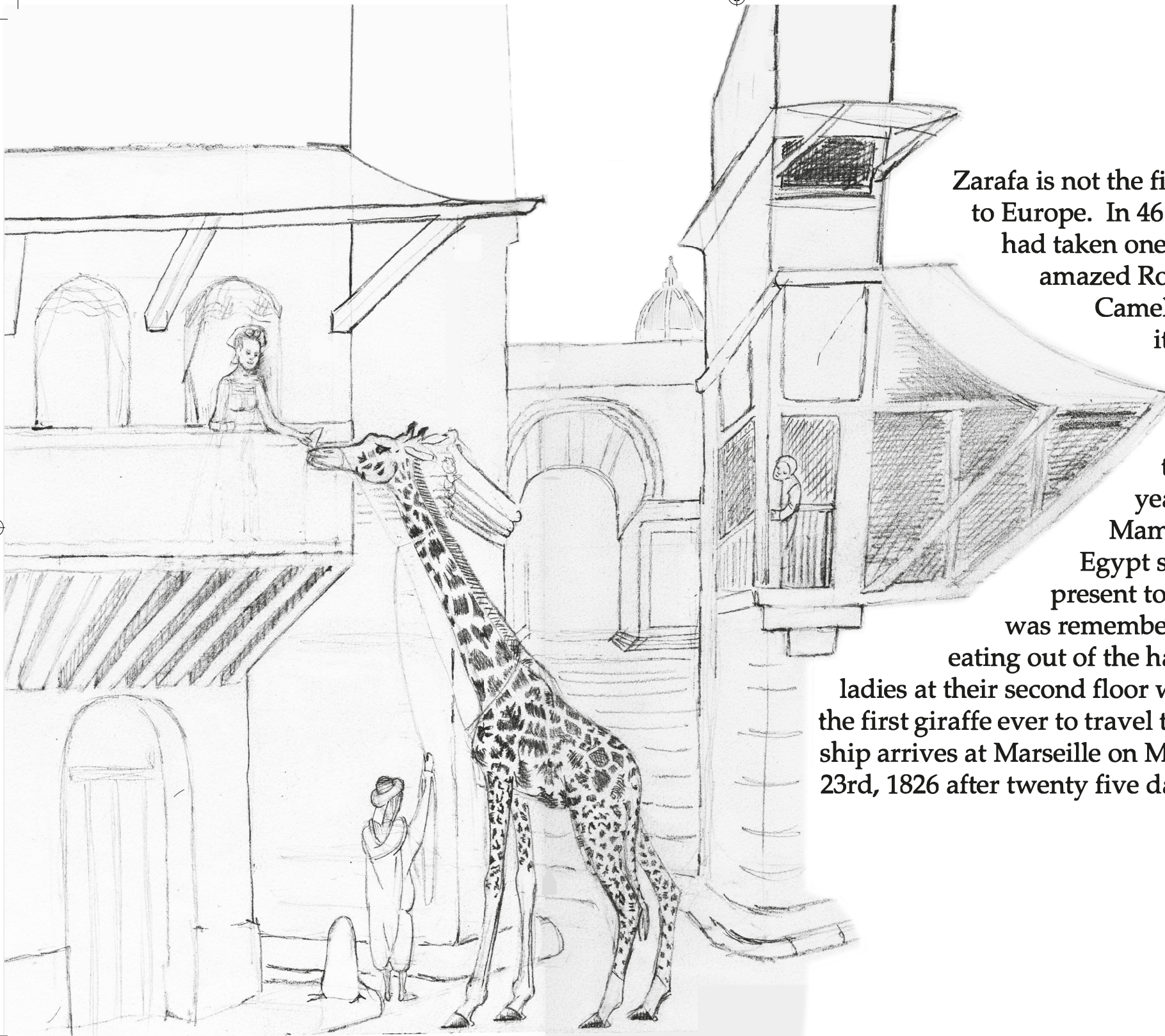


Chapter Three

Zarafa sails to France on board the ship I Due Fratelli. To protect her she wears an amulet around her neck from the Pasha containing verses from the Koran – her hijab against the evil eye.

To accompany her are Hassan, a famous animal keeper, and Atir, his servant.

Zarafa is a Masai, the smallest of giraffes but she is 3 metres 30 centimetres tall and a section of the deck has to be cut out, its edges carefully cushioned, to allow her to stand in the hold with three cows and two antelopes, her neck and head above deck amongst the passengers. An important letter is also on board destined for Marseille, the port that I Due Fratelli is bound for. The letter asks especially that Zarafa should be given 75-80 litres of fresh milk every day and that if the three cows are not providing enough, more cows should be purchased when she arrives.



Zarafa is not the first giraffe to travel to Europe. In 46 B.C. Julius Caesar had taken one to Rome and the amazed Romans named it *Camelopardalis* because it had the neck and face of a camel and the spots of a leopard. More than a thousand years later, the Mameluke Sultan of Egypt sent a giraffe as a present to Florence where she was remembered for graciously eating out of the hands of Italian ladies at their second floor windows. But she is the first giraffe ever to travel to France. Zarafa's ship arrives at Marseille on Monday October 23rd, 1826 after twenty five days at sea.

All humans and animals wanting to go ashore at Marseille have to undergo a lengthy quarantine because the city had lost more than half its inhabitants during the terrible plague of 1720 when it became known as the 'dead city'.

While Zarafa's entourage wait, the most official man in Marseille, Count Villeneuve-Bargemont, is busy building an especially tall stable in the garden of his mansion. It is decided that the long journey to Paris should take place in spring in warmer weather; meanwhile Zarafa is to spend the winter in Marseille. When the quarantine ends at last the animals have to be transferred to the newly built stable.





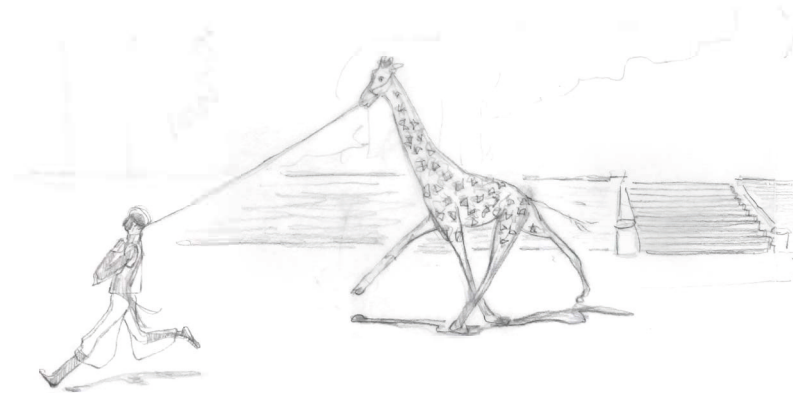
The local people have become excited and fearful because it is rumoured that a gigantic beast is lurking somewhere on the edges of their town; the Count decides that the antelopes and cows should parade through the town first, in broad daylight, to reassure them. Zarafa will be secretly led through the streets late at night whilst everyone is fast asleep.

Once safely in the Count's stable, the people of Marseille clamour to see her. The Countess, proud of her exotic visitor, holds special giraffe parties and takes her guests to the stable to meet Zarafa and her companions.

One lady, admiring Zarafa's elegance and gentleness, jumps back in fright when the giraffe bends her head (which reaches the stable ceiling) and leans out of the window towards her as fifty centimetres of blue-black tongue emerge, presumably to lick her with! But if Zarafa is friendly, she is also shy and will drink her milk only in private.



Whilst the entourage await the coming of spring, Hassan, Atir, Zarafa and the cows go out into the countryside for a daily promenade as practise for the long walk to Paris. Sometimes Zarafa is so sprightly that it takes six people to hold her when she sets off at a gallop. Mounted policemen are needed to control the curious crowd who go along too.



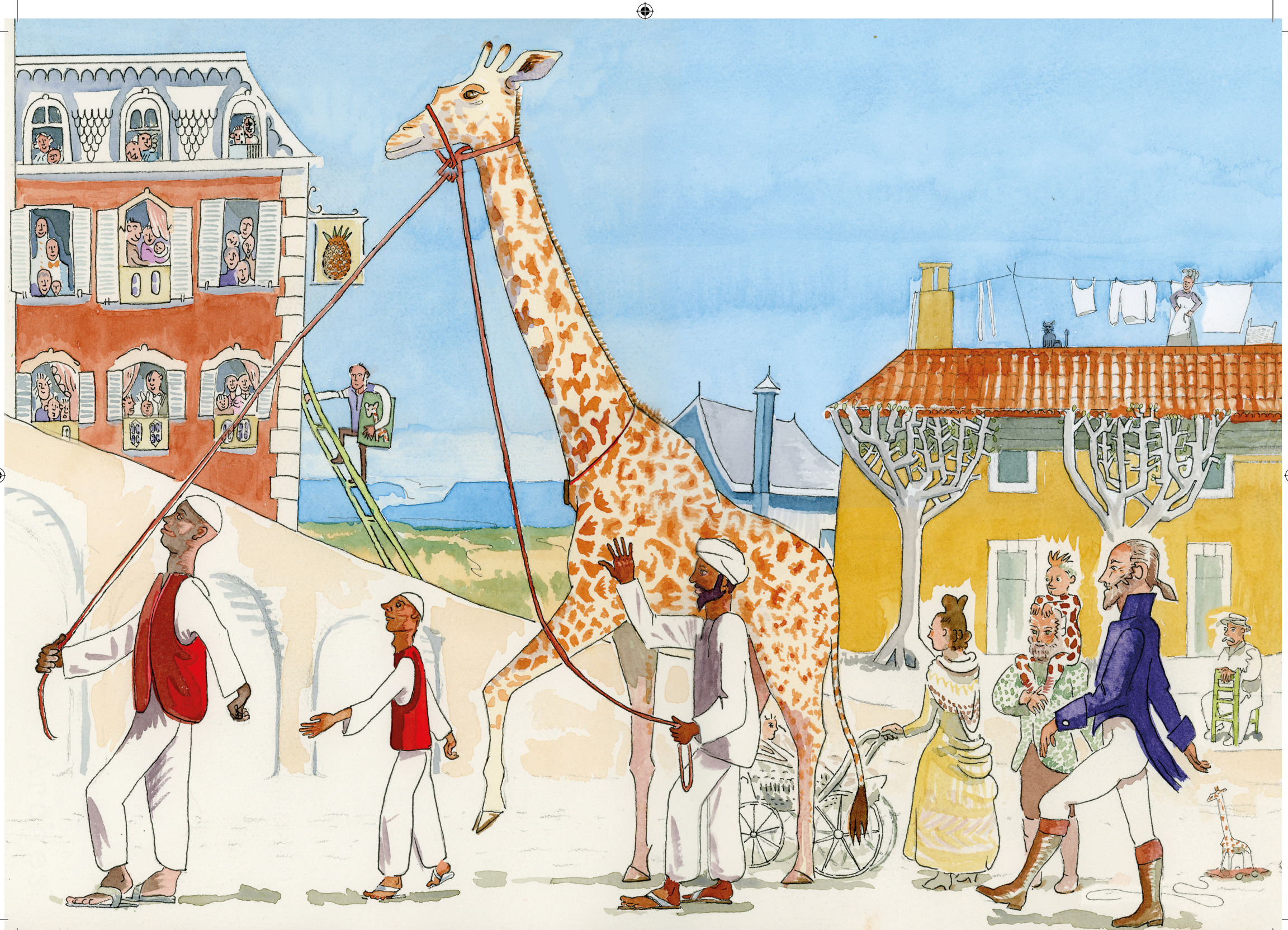
At last the time comes to leave Marseille. Etienne Geoffroy-Saint-Hilaire who, at the beginning of our story was the clever man in Napoleon's 'walking encyclopaedia', who had created the Paris zoo, arrives in May to

accompany Zarafa on her journey. He is now the most famous Professor of Zoology in the world and curious animals are his speciality. Besides antelopes and cows a gift of two mouflons is waiting for him to take to Paris as well!



On 20th May 1827, the entourage begins its 885 kilometre walk to Paris in pouring rain led by Professor Saint-Hilaire and the Count who keeps him company the first day. The cows come next, closely followed by Zarafa in a brand new, oilskin raincoat, complete with hood; behind her travels a carriage carrying the antelope, the mouflons and everybody's luggage.





Zarafa's best speed is two miles an hour so the days are long and slow but in every town and village she is greeted by the local Mayor with a welcoming speech and crowds hungry for a sight of the fabulous beast they have heard is coming their way! Children delight in running underneath her, darting between her tall legs; sometimes people are knocked over in the excitement and the Professor has to fight back the crowds but Zarafa remains her charming and friendly self. She becomes more trusting and less shy as the days pass, even consenting to drink her milk in public.

Every night, stabling has to be organised for the animals and this often means raising the roof of a farmer's barn because Zarafa's height has now reached 3 metres 60 centimetres from her hooves to the base of her horns.

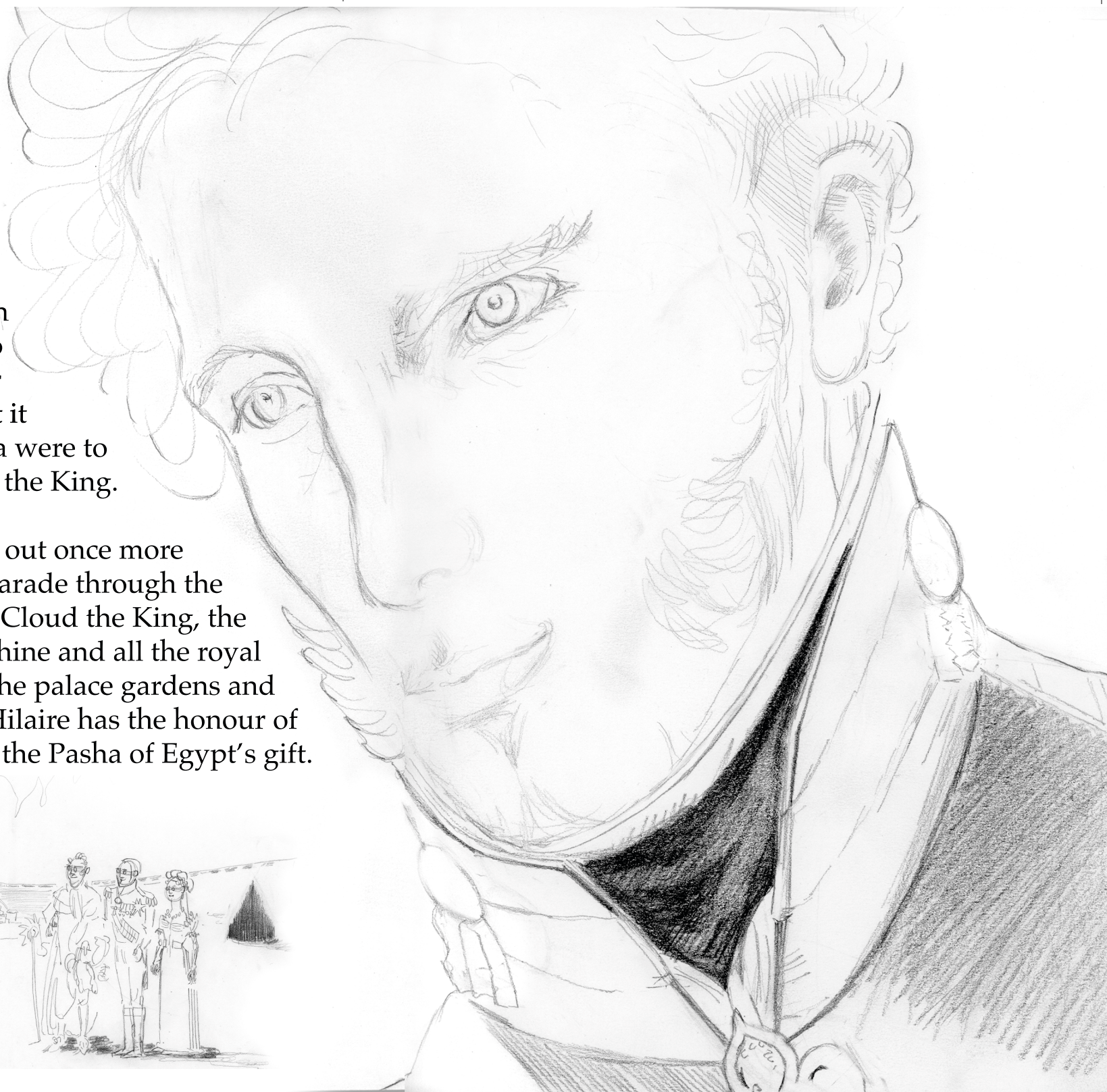
The journey to Paris takes 41 days. Zarafa walks an average of 16 miles a day and when she arrives at the zoo in the Jardins du Roi, Professor Saint-Hilaire writes to the Count back in Marseille to tell him that she has gained weight, that her muscles are firmer and her coat softer and glossier than when she left Marseille. Zarafa is now truly a gift for a King.




Chapter Four

King Charles X lives in a palace at St Cloud on the opposite side of Paris from the zoo where Zarafa is resting after her marathon walk. The King is impatient to visit the zoo and see her for himself but it is decided that it would be more fitting if Zarafa were to visit the King.

Ten days later, Zarafa sets out once more with her entourage to parade through the streets of Paris. At St Cloud the King, the Dauphin, Madam la Dauphine and all the royal court come out into the palace gardens and Professor Geoffroy-Saint-Hilaire has the honour of presenting the King with the Pasha of Egypt's gift.

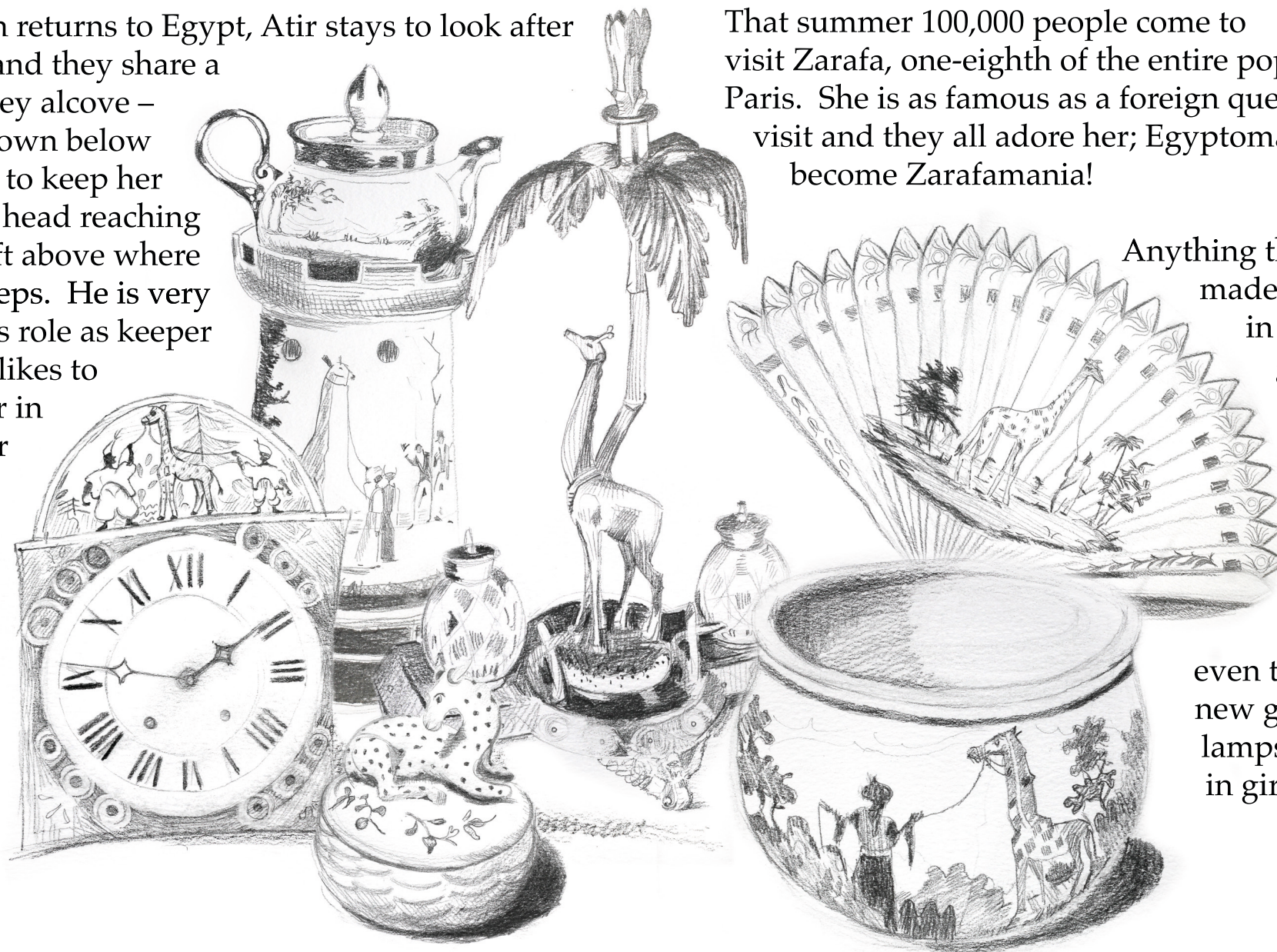




The King is delighted with Zarafa and asks to see her walk and trot; the royal gathering is astonished by her long legged gait and even more taken by her long eye lashes and gentle manner, particularly when nibbling the rose petals offered to her from the King's own hand.

Zarafa returns to the zoo to live in style in a hexagonal building called la Rotonde, built in the shape of Napoleon's famous Legion of Honour medal, which you can still visit today.

While Hassan returns to Egypt, Atir stays to look after her and they share a two-storey alcove – Zarafa down below with a stove to keep her warm, her head reaching up to the loft above where Atir sleeps. He is very proud of his role as keeper and he likes to groom her in front of their crowds of visitors with a special comb on the end of a long pole.



That summer 100,000 people come to visit Zarafa, one-eighth of the entire population of Paris. She is as famous as a foreign queen on a state visit and they all adore her; Egyptomania has become Zarafamania!

Anything that can be made in the form of a giraffe or decorated in a giraffe pattern is the height of fashion - there is even talk of the new gas street lamps being made in giraffe form!

Women begin wearing their hair à la Girafe, piled high on top of their heads with flowers and feathers and tied with ribbons so that they are obliged to ride in their carriages seated on the floor. Gentlemen learn to tie their cravats à la Girafe and for children there are toy giraffes with articulated necks and giraffe gingerbread.

Zarafa lives in her home in la Rotonde for 18 years until 1845, her 21st year, outliving both King Charles X and Professor Saint-Hilaire. For the last six years of her life she has a companion – France's second giraffe who has also travelled up the Nile and been given to France as a gift. But it will always be Zarafa that everyone remembers.



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Acknowledgements:

Allin, Michael. Zarafa: A Giraffe's true story, from Deep in Africa to the Heart of Paris. New York: Walker and Company, 1998.

Lebleu, Olivier. Les Avatars de Zarafa, Première girafe de France, Chronique d'une girafomania: 1826-1845. Editions arléa.







The incredible true story of the giraffe offered as a gift to Charles X of France by the Pasha of Egypt in 1827 – captured in Nubia, she travelled up the Nile and across the Mediterranean to Marseille, then walking the 885 kilometres to Paris with her entourage, astonishing the people of France whom had never seen a giraffe before...

