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Opening extract from

Tony Robinson's Weird World of Wonders! Egyptians

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THE SEVENTH WONDER

There were **Seven** Wonders in the Ancient World . . .

The Statue of Zeus at Olympia





The Lighthouse of Alexandria



The Temple of Artemis

The Hanging Gardens of Babylon





The Colossus of Rhodes





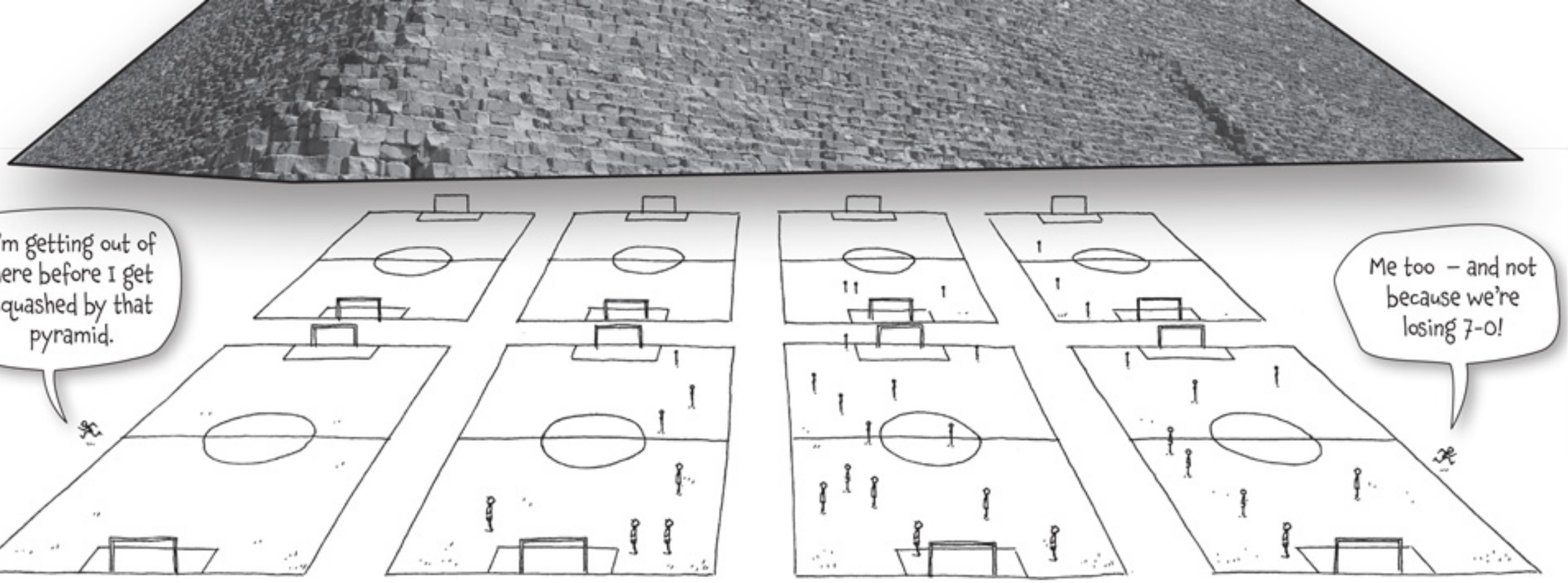
The Great Tomb at Halicarnassus

All these six Wonders were destroyed long ago.
But the **seventh** is still standing. It is . . .

The Great Pyramid of Egypt!!!

When it was built around four and a half thousand years ago, the Great Pyramid was the biggest building on Earth. In those days the tallest thing most people had ever seen was a really big tree. Can you imagine what they thought when they saw it?





It was over 140 metres high, and its base spreads out over an area of 13 acres (that's more than 8 football pitches).

But the Great Pyramid wasn't a one-off. Over a **hundred** pyramids are still dotted among the sands of Egypt.

So why were they built?

PYRAMIDIOTS!

The pyramids were built by the Pharaohs (pronounced FAIR-RO'S) – the rulers of Egypt. They were designed to keep the Pharaoh's body and soul safe after his death. The Egyptians believed that if they didn't watch over their dead Pharaohs, their gods would get angry and would punish them with drought, plague, invasion and an all-round rotten time.

So each pyramid was a giant tomb, and somewhere inside it was the coffin of the Pharaoh and the belongings he needed in the next life.

Now you're probably saying to yourself, *'I can see why they might decide to build a tomb to keep their dead ruler safe, but why did it have to be in the shape of a gigantic pyramid?'*

Well the answer to that is . . . errr!

Actually, I haven't a clue.

It's a question that even the experts can't answer. Rather annoyingly, the Egyptians didn't write down why they built pyramids . . . the pyramidiots!

POSSIBLE REASONS FOR BUILDING A PYRAMID

Maybe it was:

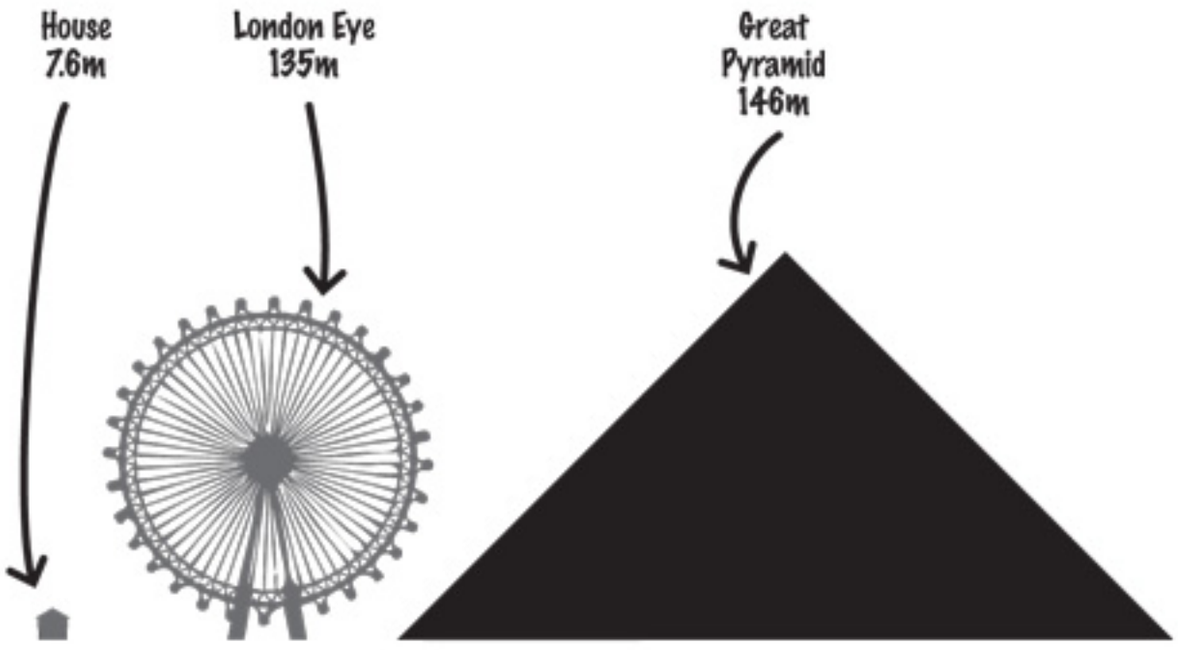
a) Because a pyramid looked like the first mound of earth that rose out of the sea when the world was created.

or

b) Because the Egyptians worshipped the sun, and a pyramid looked like the sun's rays (if you think of the sun shining through the clouds after a spot of rain, the rays are vaguely pyramid-shaped).

or

c) Because they thought the shape of the pyramid would help guide the Pharaoh's soul up into the sky where he could be united with the gods.



or

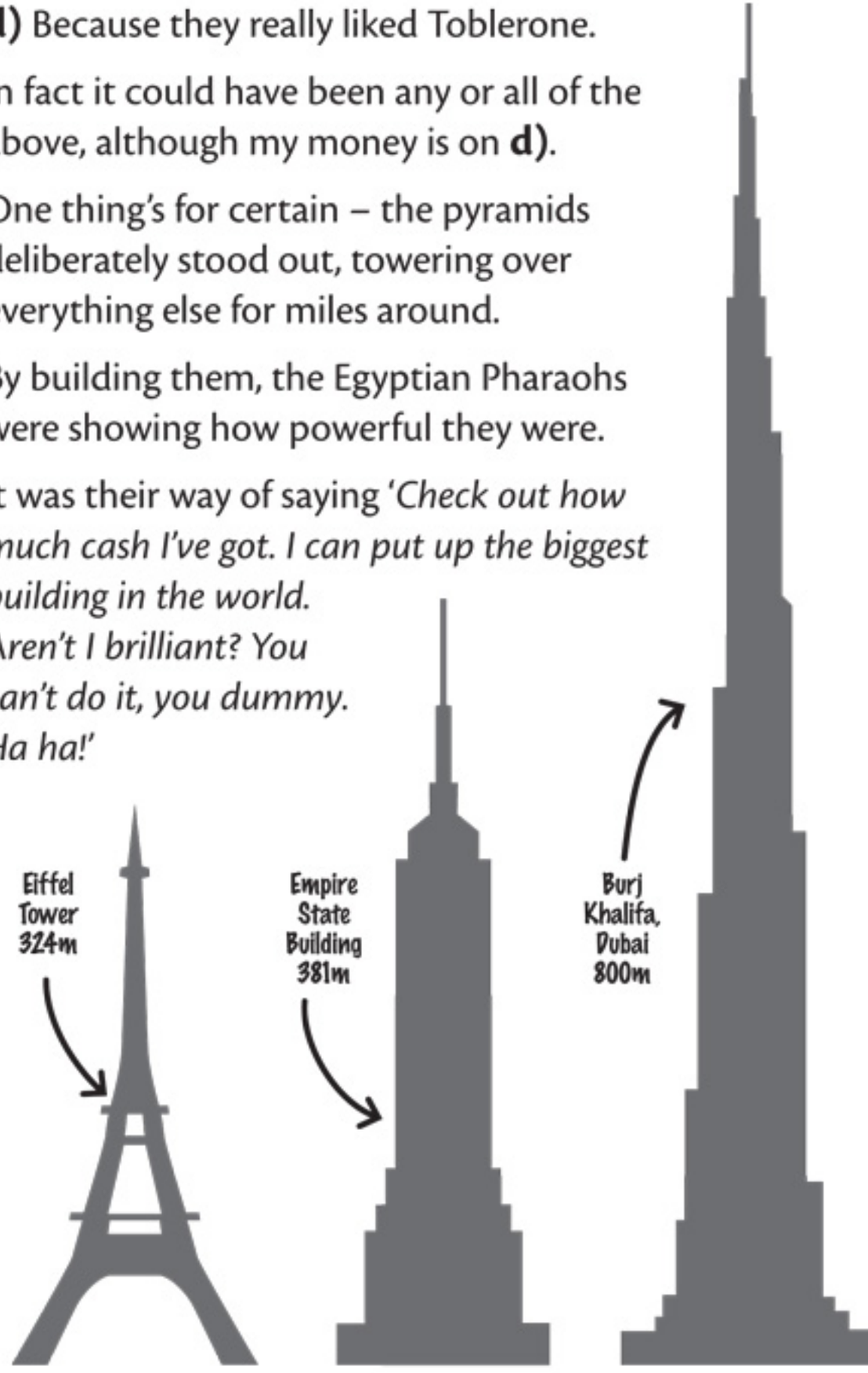
d) Because they really liked Toblerone.

In fact it could have been any or all of the above, although my money is on **d)**.

One thing's for certain – the pyramids deliberately stood out, towering over everything else for miles around.

By building them, the Egyptian Pharaohs were showing how powerful they were.

It was their way of saying '*Check out how much cash I've got. I can put up the biggest building in the world. Aren't I brilliant? You can't do it, you dummy. Ha ha!*'

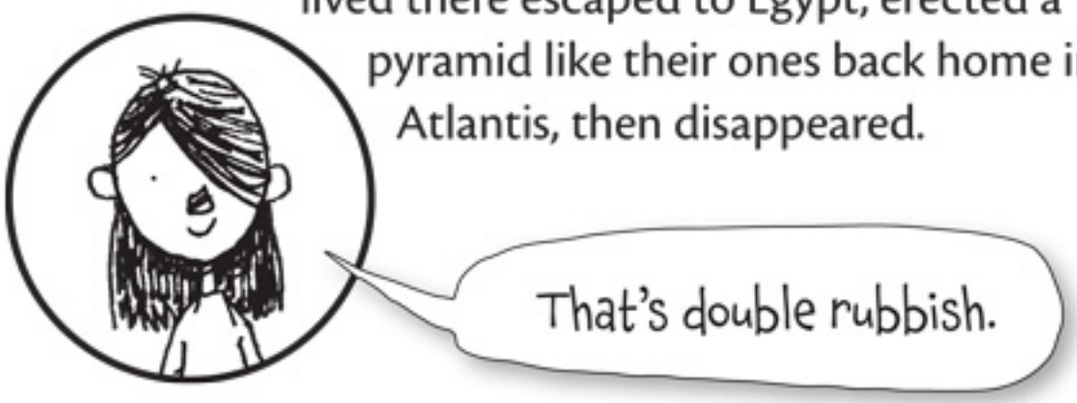


WHO INVENTED PYRAMIDS?

Thousands of years ago when the people of our planet were ignorant and stupid, alien fish-men flew their spaceships down to Earth, landed in Egypt, built a pyramid, then flew off again.



Once upon a time a terrible flood engulfed the great city of Atlantis. The handsome giants who lived there escaped to Egypt, erected a pyramid like their ones back home in Atlantis, then disappeared.



For thousands of years, though, people have been making up stories like this, because they couldn't believe ordinary human beings were smart enough to build them.

BUT HERE IS THE TRUTH

The ancient Egyptians built them all by themselves – and remember they didn't have cranes or cement-mixers or power drills like modern builders: they had to do it all by hand!

It took them a long time to learn how to make a proper pyramid, though. Their first attempts were frankly a bit lame. They were made out of mud bricks and were big and rectangular, like giant doorsteps. (In fact they were called **mastabas**, which comes from the Arabic word meaning 'bench', because that's what people who'd never seen a doorstep thought they looked like.) They certainly weren't very dramatic or stylish.





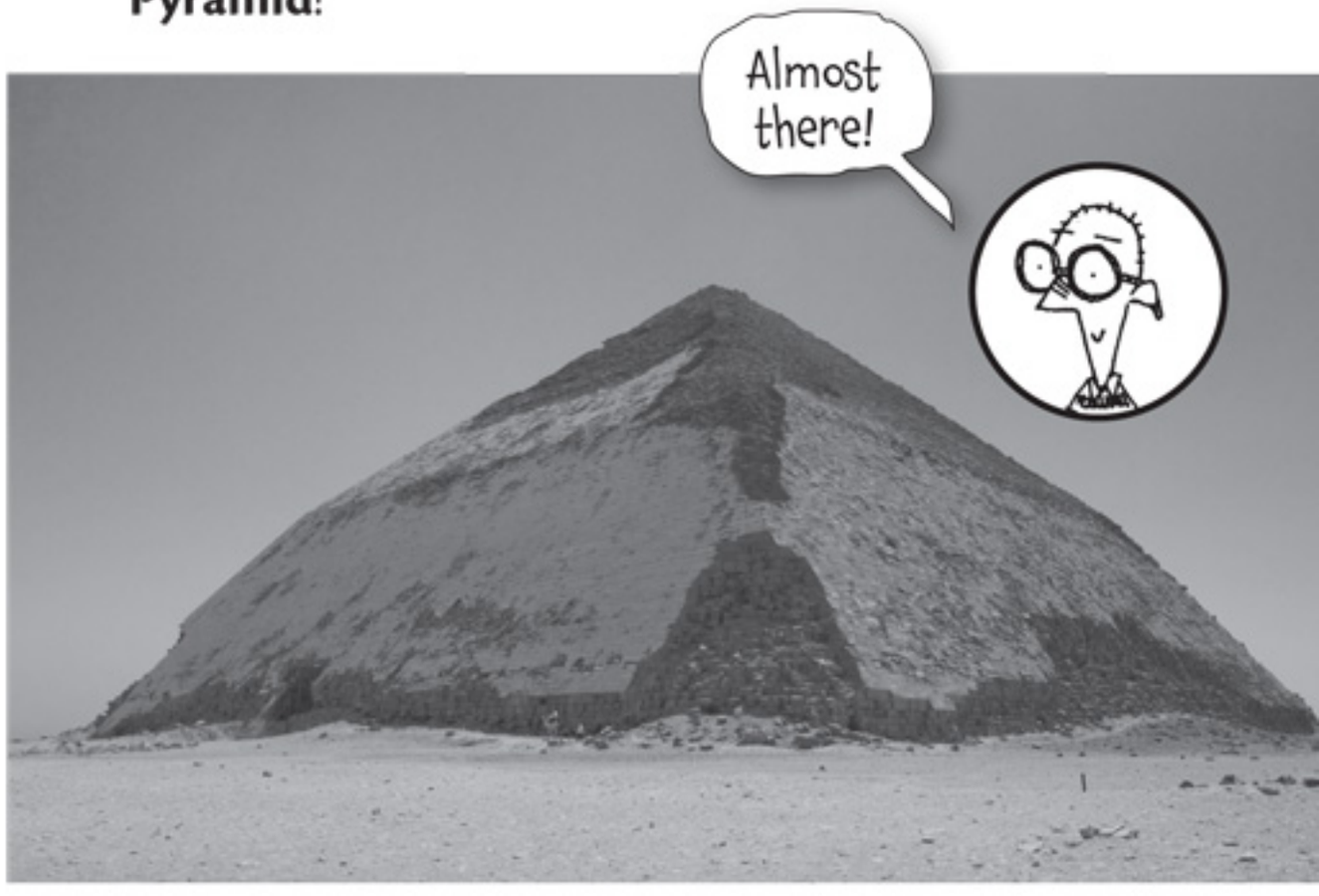
But then one day, an architect called Imhotep decided to try something a bit different. He built a mastaba out of stone, then he built another smaller one on top of it, then another even smaller one on top of that one, and he kept going until he'd built six mastabas one on top of the other – a bit like Lego (if Lego blocks were made of limestone instead of plastic, were over a metre high, and didn't have those knobbly bits on them).

What he'd created was the first pyramid. It's called a **step pyramid** for obvious reasons.

Step pyramids became all the rage – every Pharaoh wanted one, and they all wanted theirs to be bigger and better than the last one.

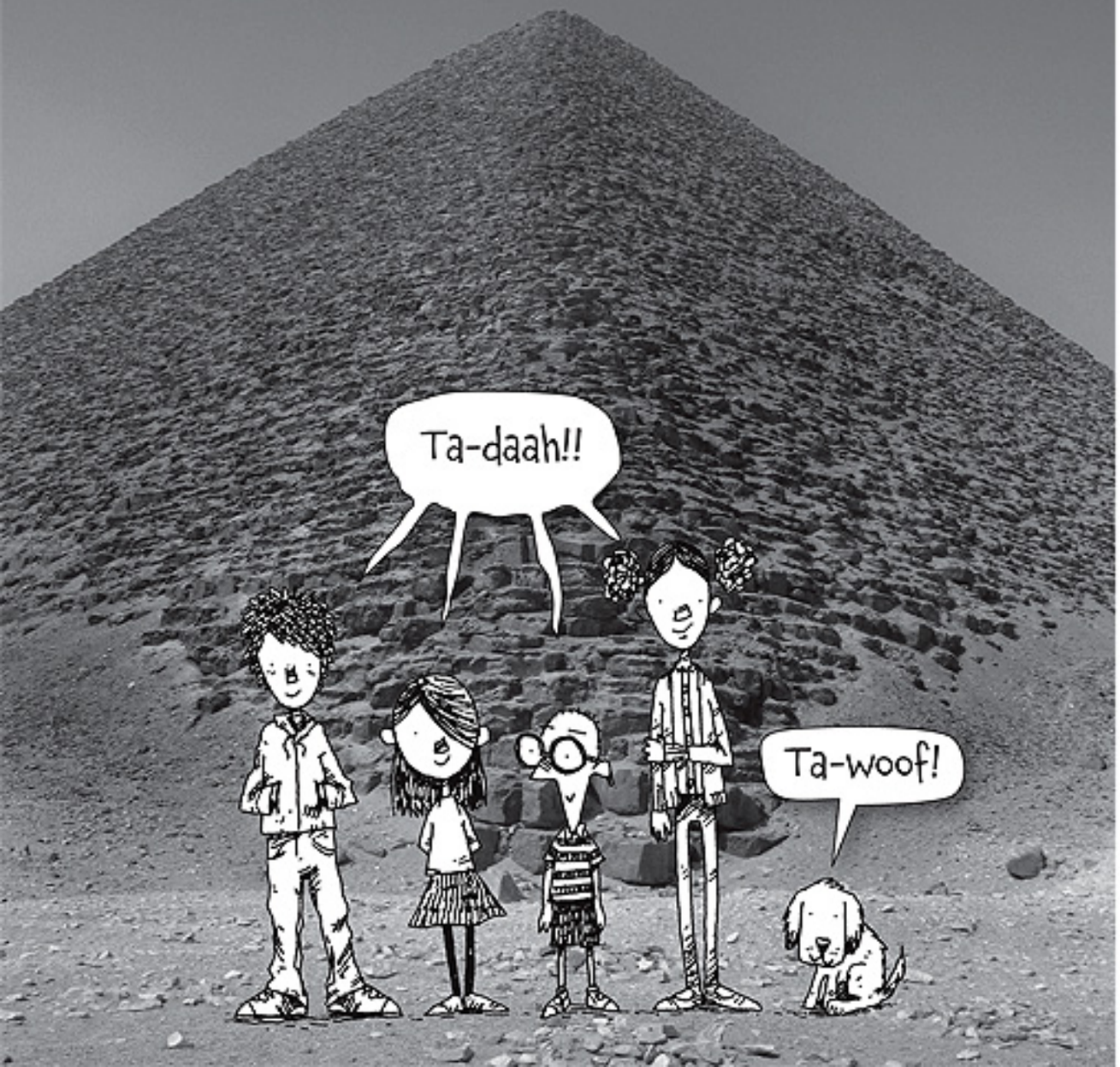
Then along came a Pharaoh called Snefru (quite a lot of Pharaohs had weird-sounding names: you just have to accept that they sounded ordinary to Egyptians). He decided he wanted to have something even more flash, a pyramid that was smooth rather than one with stepped sides.

This was obviously much trickier than plonking stone blocks on top of each other, and no one really knew how to do it. They started by building quite a steep sided pyramid, but then halfway through they had to change the angle to prevent it collapsing. So what they ended up with was a very wonky pyramid. Miraculously, it's still there today. It's actually known as the **Bent Pyramid**!



But Snefru wasn't happy with his Bent Pyramid – and you can't blame him. He told the builders to go away and think of something else, and being the Pharaoh, they didn't argue with him.

So they built another one, known as the **Red Pyramid** because of the reddish stone used to make it. This time they got the angle right and the Red Pyramid was the first true pyramid! Phew!



A VERY ANCIENT EGYPTIAN GAG

Pharaoh Snefru is said to have been the subject of one the oldest recorded jokes.

Question: 'How do you put a smile on the face of a bored Pharaoh?'

Answer: 'Sail a boatload of young women dressed in nothing but fishing nets down the Nile and tell him to go and catch a fish.'



When he died, Snefru was buried in his Red Pyramid, and his son Khufu became Pharaoh. And guess what . . . Khufu immediately started work on his own pyramid. It was a great time to be pyramid builder – you were never out of work!

Khufu's was the fanciest pyramid ever constructed – the **Great Pyramid**. It was built using 2.3 million blocks of stone and although today it's a muddy brown colour, originally it would have been covered in polished white limestone and capped in gold. This would have reflected the sunlight and made it shine for miles around – it probably made the locals wish sunglasses had been invented.



JOJO'S HANDY HINTS FOR BUILDING A GREAT PYRAMID

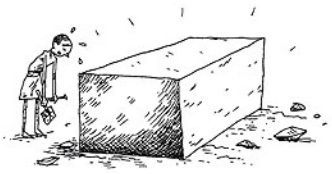
1 First, dig up millions of lumps of rock.

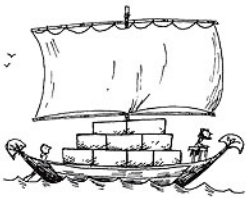




2 Then take a copper chisel, chip a hole in each lump, stick a wooden wedge in them and whack them with a hammer to split them so they've got flat sides.

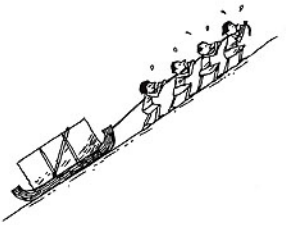
3 Repeat this until they're all rectangular.

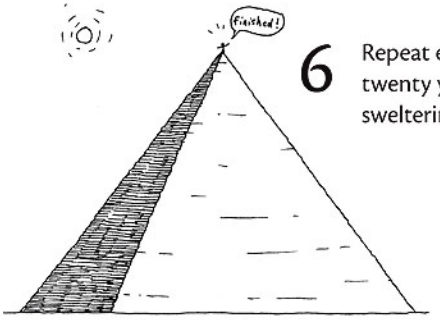




4 Next load up all the split stone into a boat, and sail it up the Nile to the building site.

5 Now drag each block up a series of earth ramps to its place in the pyramid, using sledges, ropes and levers.





6 Repeat every day for twenty years in the sweltering desert sun.