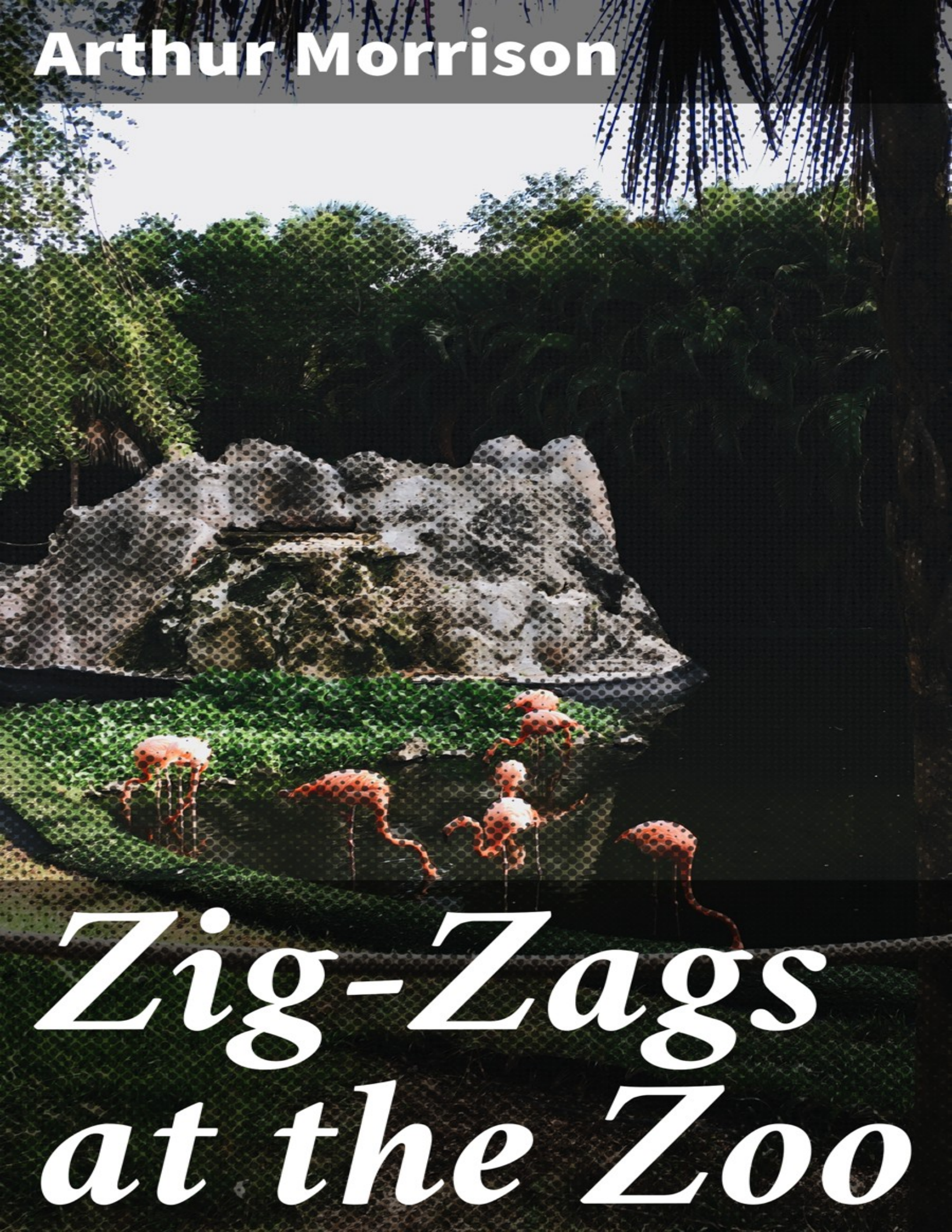
Arthur Morrison



Zig-Zags at the Zoo

Arthur Morrison

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I. — ZIG-ZAG PRELUSORY

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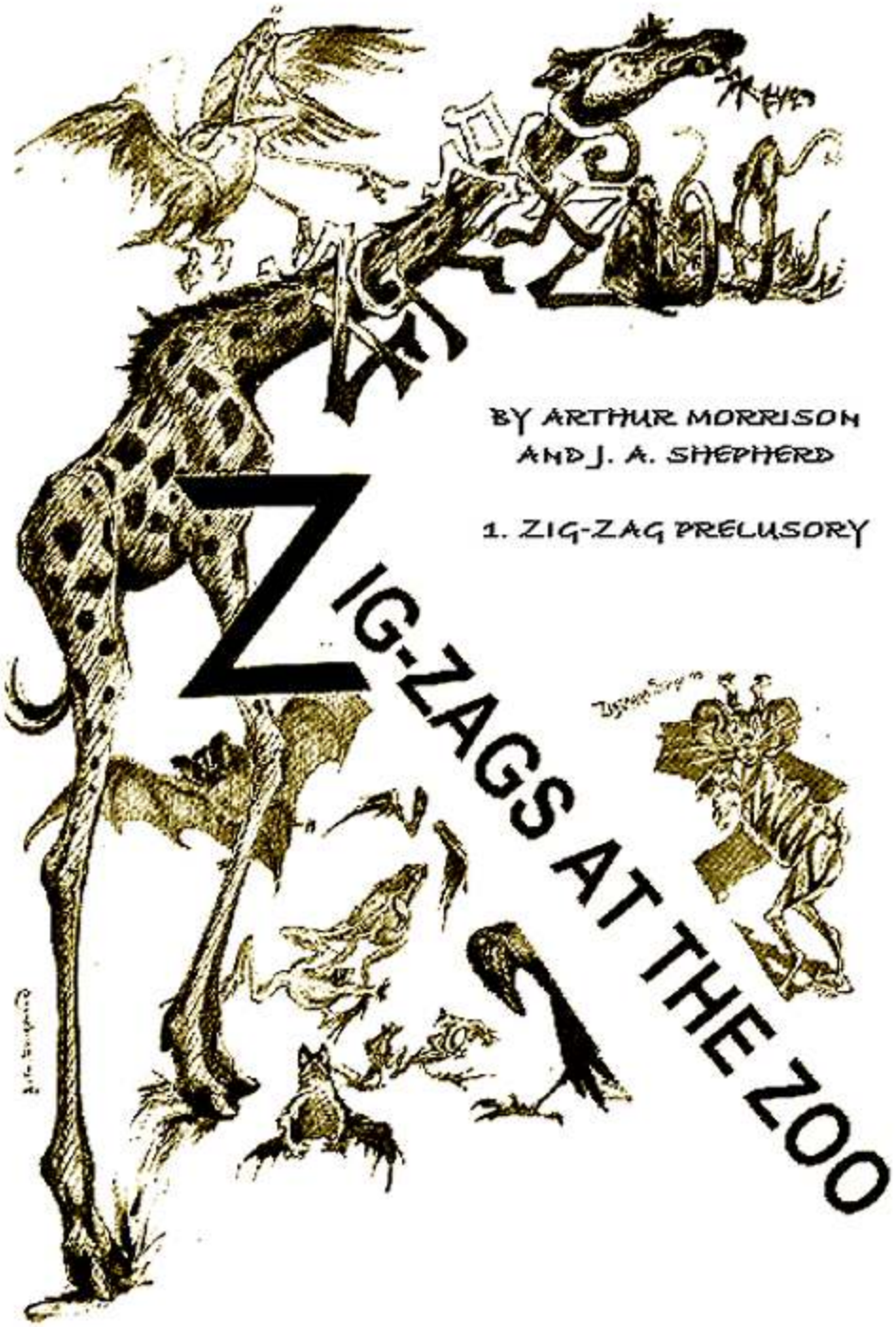


"ZIG-ZAGS AT THE ZOO" is a title which must not be misunderstood. The Zigzag—though possibly suggestive of a beast with stripes—is not a newly-captured wild animal lately added to the great London collection; it is merely the

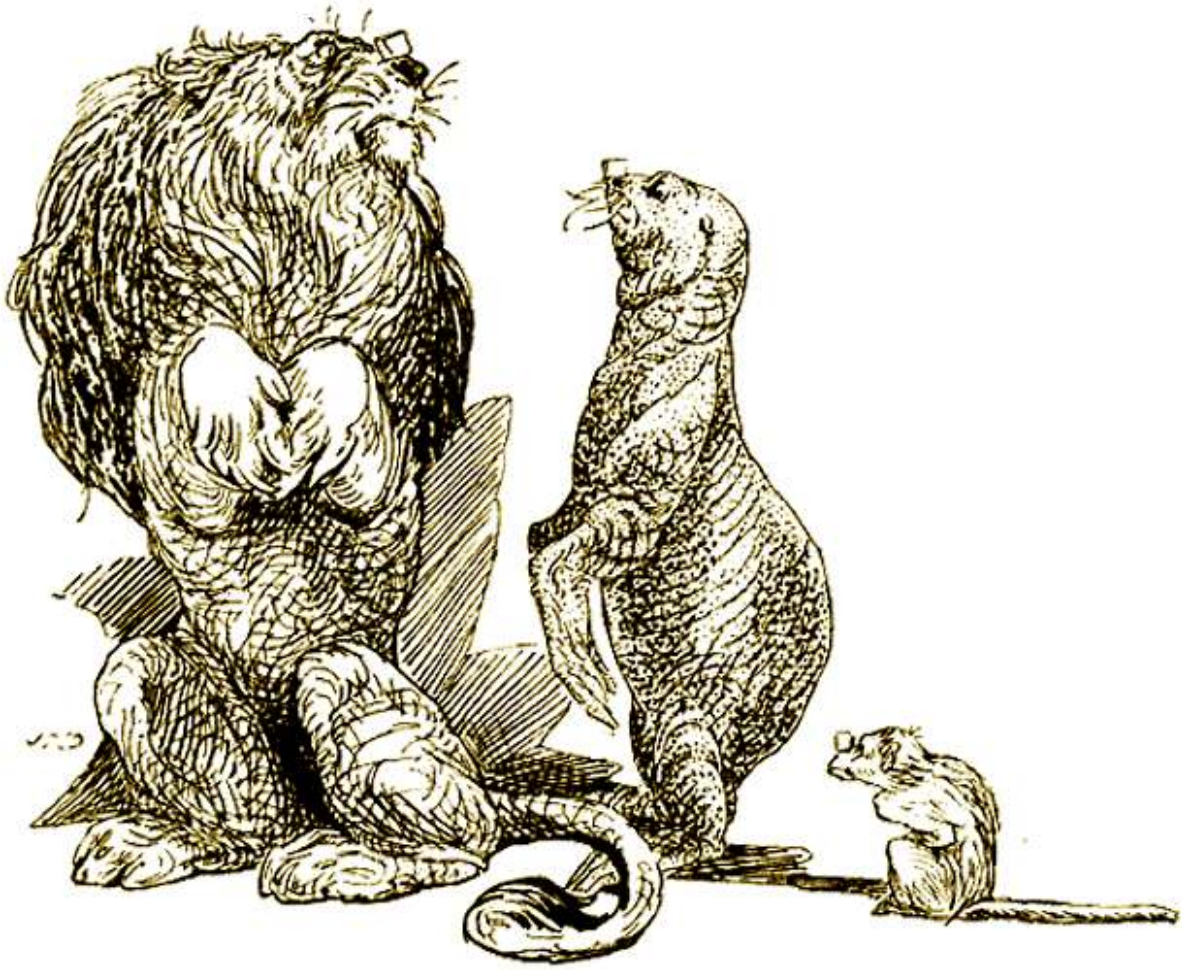
ordinary commonplace, charming, and delightful Zig-zag of everyday existence. For variety is the spice of life, and every man taking ease and joy of his life shall go through it in zig-zags. The direct road is the path of the toiler. Observe a man at a picture exhibition—a man who begins at number one on the catalogue and goes right through with solemn persistence until he arrives at the longest number at the last page, and the uttermost corner of the last gallery. That man is either "doing the show" for a newspaper, or prefers to make the pictures an affliction unto himself. A picture show, like everything else, should be taken on the zig-zag. The man who plans and cogitates the nearest way between two streets—that man is too busy poor fellow, to know the sweets of the zig-zag. To go upon the zig-zag is to see more, and with greater entertainment. Who sees more stars, more lamp-posts, front-doors, and keyholes than other men—yea, even unto tenfold? He who goes home on the zig-zag.

The zig-zag is the token, the mystic sign, of contentful ease and good fellowship the world over; the very word is passed to us, like a loving-cup, by the French, who have taken it in all good amity from the Germans, as Littré himself testifieth, and what greater sign of universal brotherhood shall you want than that? The zig-zag, too, is necessary; for the soberest citizen may not walk home through many streets in a straight line, lest he break his nose. "Zig-zag: something with short sharp turns," says the respectable Webster. Let us, therefore, take here a sharp turn, lest we run our noses against the wall of brown speculation.

Many good friends have I in the gardens of the Zoological Society of London. These good friends devote their entire lives to the furtherance of a popular taste for zoology, and are, or should be at once elected, most distinguished active members of the society. To pay certain gold guineas a year is a good thing; but what human member of the society would live amiably behind bars for the cause, to be stared at and made the subject of personal impudences? Now, all these fine fellows have their individual characters, their little personal habits and crotchets, just as have those distinguished zoologists who walk upright and wear tail-coats.

For instance, you may have come upon a row of three lions, or monkeys, or seals, as the case may be, and to you, a casual visitor, they shall be but three very similar seals or

monkeys or lions. So also in the official guide-book, for a guide-book which is sober and official can say no other. But scrape close acquaintance with those creatures and talk to their keepers, and you shall find them Bill, Polly, and Sam: Bill, perhaps, being an easy-going lion (or seal or monkey), with a weakness for a lump of sugar, and a disregard of the state of his coat; Polly a coquette, with a vast pride in her tail; and Sam a touchy old fellow who objects to all but one particular keeper; and each with a history. Among these distinguished personages shall we zig-zag, and improve acquaintance. Meantime, let us sit upon this seat on the terrace with a good view of the gardens before us, while the big good-humoured Jung Perchad stalks along below with a howdahful of children and an eye to the casual bun; and let us meditate.



I like to conduct my brown studies in an atmosphere of mingled evolution and metempsychosis. It is a pity that the theory of our evolution from the primordial protoplasm in an inclusive line through every living species should now be considered old-fashioned. I like to imagine that among my remote ancestors every living thing is represented—it gives them a family interest. And if, further, I can persuade myself that *I* have been everything, at one time or another, from a bluebottle to a giraffe—why, then I can brown-study forever. The imaginative mind can compass all things. Well may I remember the comfort of a mouth six feet by measurement along the lips, in a crocodile. You take in your enemy in one large generous smile, and he is seen no more. And a tail for

others—the cow, the dog, the horse, the lion, the tiger—is a convenience, both as a fly-whisk and as a help to working up a tantrum. In evolution from a bluebottle to a giraffe one learns the value of these things.

As a bluebottle, I think I should have enjoyed life—as a young one certainly; an elderly bluebottle gets bloated, slow, and gouty, losing his sense of humour. He grows infirm of purpose, too, and forgets to return to the same spot on a bald head after the eighteenth time of chasing off—the eighteenth time being really just when the fun begins. Sometimes he passes over a red nose altogether, probably from a fear of aggravating the gout in his feet. I am a little more doubtful about the giraffe. I should certainly have had a better opportunity of holding my head high in the world than I ever have now; and the giraffe has the advantage of

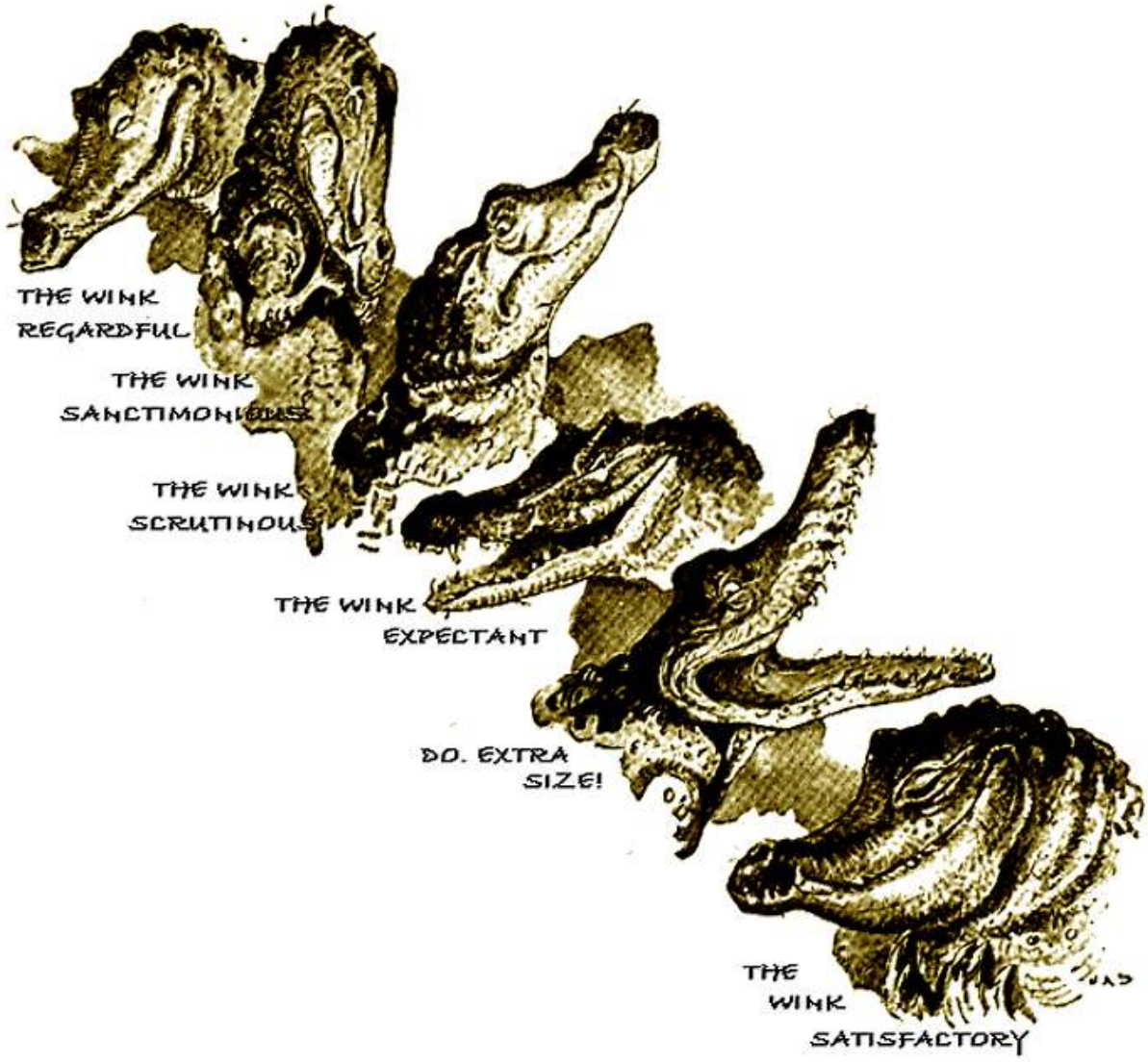
the bluebottle in the matter of gouty feet. But what a neck for mumps!

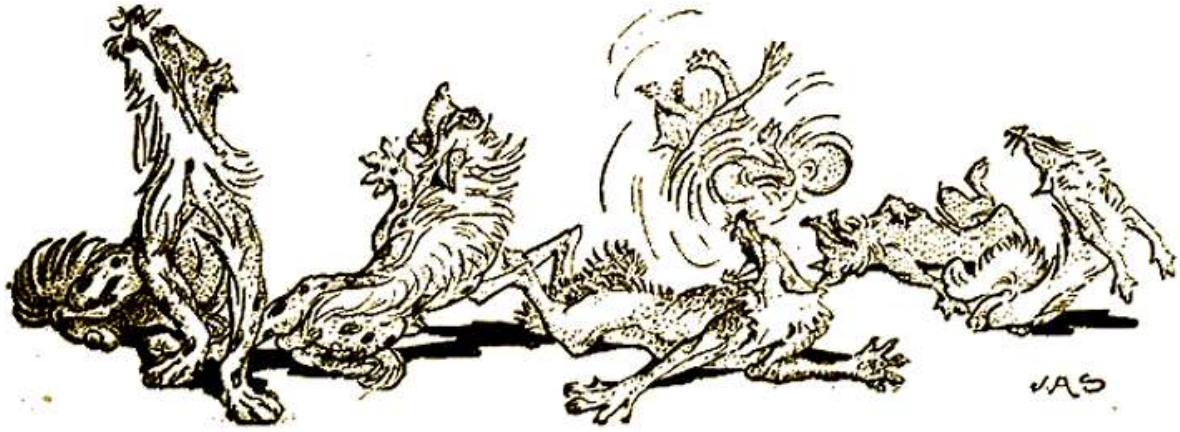
I think I *must* have been a raven or a jackdaw at some time—reasoning by induction—and I must have had a rare good time. The great object of a raven's life is the collection

of valuables, wherein he resembles a large half of the human race. He steals rings, silver thimbles, and money, hoarding them in a safe and quiet place. Now, there is nothing so impartial as good Dame Nature. For everything she gives its compensation; every poison has its antidote, every excess its counteracting scarcity; nothing dies. Everything is a cause, and the effects of all causes work on for eternity. So that I conclude that my life as a raven must have been peculiarly successful from a business point of view, and that for that flood of good fortune I am now suffering the ebb. Obviously I must have been bursting with this world's wealth in some life or another, else why things as they so painfully are? Or perhaps—stunning thought!—I am saving up all this penury against a flood of millions to come. But, come when it will, it shall never overwhelm me, for I shall take a holiday in a Scotch hotel. I quite believe I skipped the crocodiles; at any rate, I find little hereditary affinity between us. When a crocodile objects to its surroundings, it refuses its food; as a boy at school, I objected very much to my surroundings, but without any effect of that sort.

My late friend—God rest him!—Mr. Jamrach, used to have rare tussles with his crocodiles. They were valuable as property, and when, out of spite, they took to attempting suicide by starvation, he had them tied up firmly and fed forcibly with a long pole *à la* ramrod. I never remember being so obstinate about my dinner as that; and if I had, from what I recollect of him, I don't believe my worthy preceptor would have done as Mr. Jamrach did. I never heard of his using any stick in that way. Beyond all this too,

it should be observed that the crocodile has three distinct lids to each eye, whereby he is equipped for the performance of six separate and entirely distinct winks of the single variety, and an incalculable number of the more complicated sort by combination. Now the wink is the infallible sign of a frivolous and larky nature, and in disclaiming all relationship with the crocodile I need say no more than this.



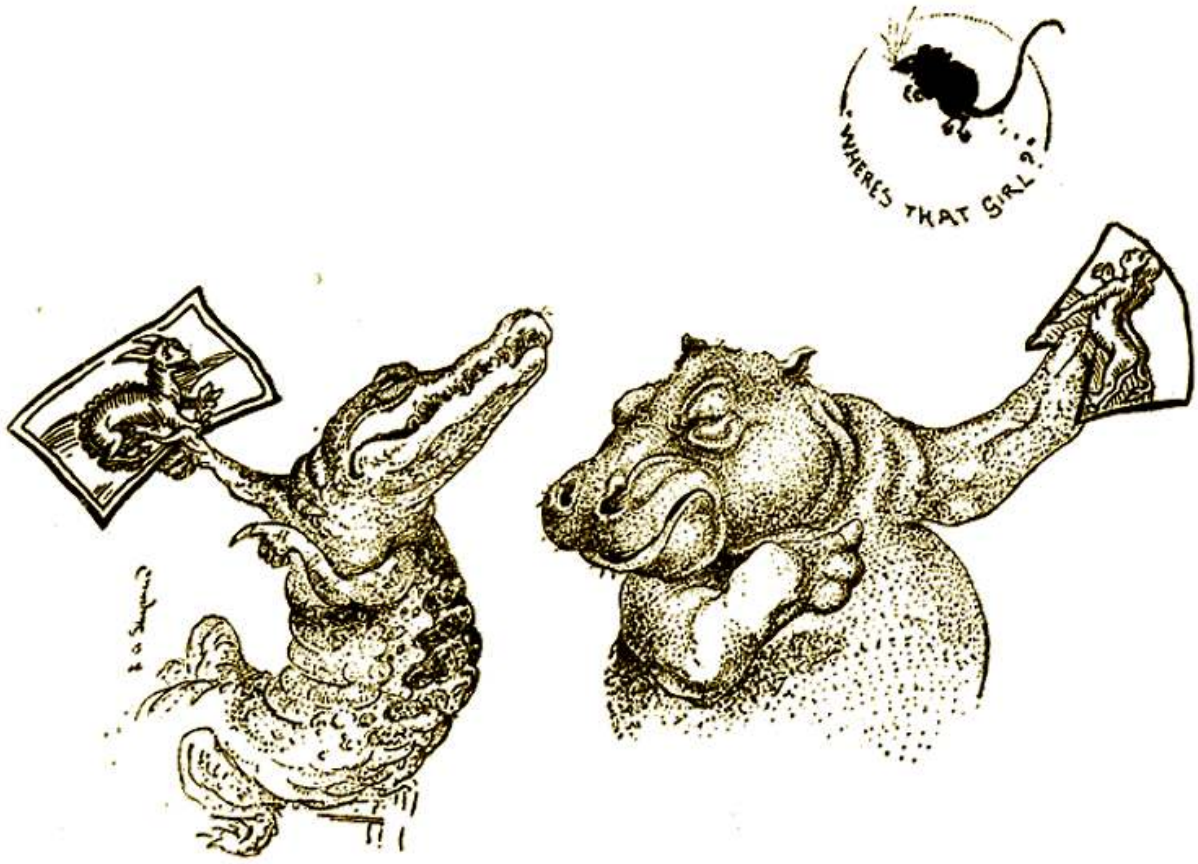


I often wonder what all these animals think of the band which plays here in the summer. The coming of the warm season is a time of joy, at any rate to the more tropical varieties, and it seems a pity to make it sad with a band. Perhaps it is done on the great principle of universal compensation already spoken of. Not that the band isn't a good one, you should understand, but a band of any sort before dinner is an infliction. Music is rather a nuisance to a hungry man, and its proper occasion arrives after a good dinner. Lions and tigers have ten times the capacity for hunger granted to man, and should be considered accordingly. Herein do I speak with feeling; for on several days of the week a German band plays near the corner of my street in the hungriest hour of the twenty-four, and on all the other afternoons the young lady next door, who is learning to sing (and taking a very long time over it) practises her scales.

I should like to have met that German band when I was—say a tiger, and very hungry. But the young lady who will never learn to sing is infinitely worse, and deserves no consideration at all. I should like an opportunity of attacking her as a mouse.

Old Sir John Maundevile is a man one would like to have met. I would do a great deal—even unto paying at the gate—to inspect a zoological garden furnished with a good selection of Sir John's discoveries. I should like, for instance, to see his "wylde Gees, that han 2 Hedes." They are not found in many poultry-yards nowadays, and have become swans on inn signs. I should like, too, to see that "fulle felonous Best" with a black head and three long horns, "trenchant in front, scharpe as a Sword," with which he "sleethe the Olifaunt," Again, I think I should like to see

those "Ipotaynes, that dwellen sometyme in the Watre and sometyme on the Lond; and thei ben half Man and half Hors," and compare them with the blithesome hippopotamus as we now see him in our own Zoo.



I should like to have the opinion of the man end on his equine hinder half, and to see how he walked; for, unlike the centaur, the "ipotayne" had only two legs. I should like to get a "cokadrille" as Maundevile's book pictures him, with long legs and ears like a donkey's, and show him to the sleepy alligators in the reptile house, by way of reconciling long-sundered relatives. But most I should like to get my mutton from a tree in the way Sir John did in a kingdom "that men clepen Caldilhe"—somewhere, it would seem, between India and China. On the tree, says our good friend, grows a fruit "as though it were Gourdes" and in each of

these gourds grows a "lyttylle Lomb, withouten Wolle," which lamb, as well as the fruit, Sir John has eaten. "And that is a gret Marveylle," quoth Sir John; and so it is, when you come to think of it.

It is a pity that there was no wool on those "Lombs;" it would have given the narrative a certain artistic completeness, a rounding off. But, since there was no wool, it is fortunate that Sir John distinctly said so, otherwise people might have called him a liar.

Before the Zoological Society find specimens of these rarities, perhaps they may come upon another giraffe or two. Sir John Maundevile really plays light with the giraffe. He might have made something much more startling of it than "a Best pomelee or spotted; that is but a litylle more highe than is a Stede; but he hathe the Necke a 20 Cubytes long; and his Croup and his Tayl is as of an Hert; and he may loken over a gret highe Hous." Moreover, the illustrative woodcut in my copy actually under-represents the neck by full two-thirds; but that is for the very best of all reasons—there is no room on the block for any more. Perhaps it was because Sir John vouched for the giraffe that up to the present century most people in this country disbelieved in its existence.

But just consider how he might have put it, and with truth; and how that heavy-handed artist might have put it—without truth. An animal with a deer's head, a leopard's skin, a swan's neck; a tongue that was used as a man's hand to grasp things a foot from its nose. With eyes that saw in every direction without a turn of the head; with nostrils that closed or opened. Withal higher than three tall

men, one above another, and capable of slaying a man with one kick of a hinder leg, yet so timid as to fly before a child or a little dog! One feels rather ashamed of Sir John, after all, for neglecting his opportunities. There is difficulty in the capture of a giraffe, and there is expense. These obstacles, however, and greater ones, have been overcome again and again in time past by the Zoological Society of London, and probably giraffes soon will be seen here again. They are becoming rare even in their own habitat, and an African hunt would be a long and trying one. However, a giraffe is still to be had, and the time is distant when we shall become dependent for the supply upon a forlornly possible giraffe shower. Fish, frogs, and insects in showers are not unknown, while cats and dogs are proverbial. Water-spouts cause these fish and frog showers; in a giraffe transaction it would be necessary to charter rather a strong waterspout, and to stay indoors awhile; all a serious possibility considered from a Maundevillian standpoint.

II. — ZIG-ZAG URSINE

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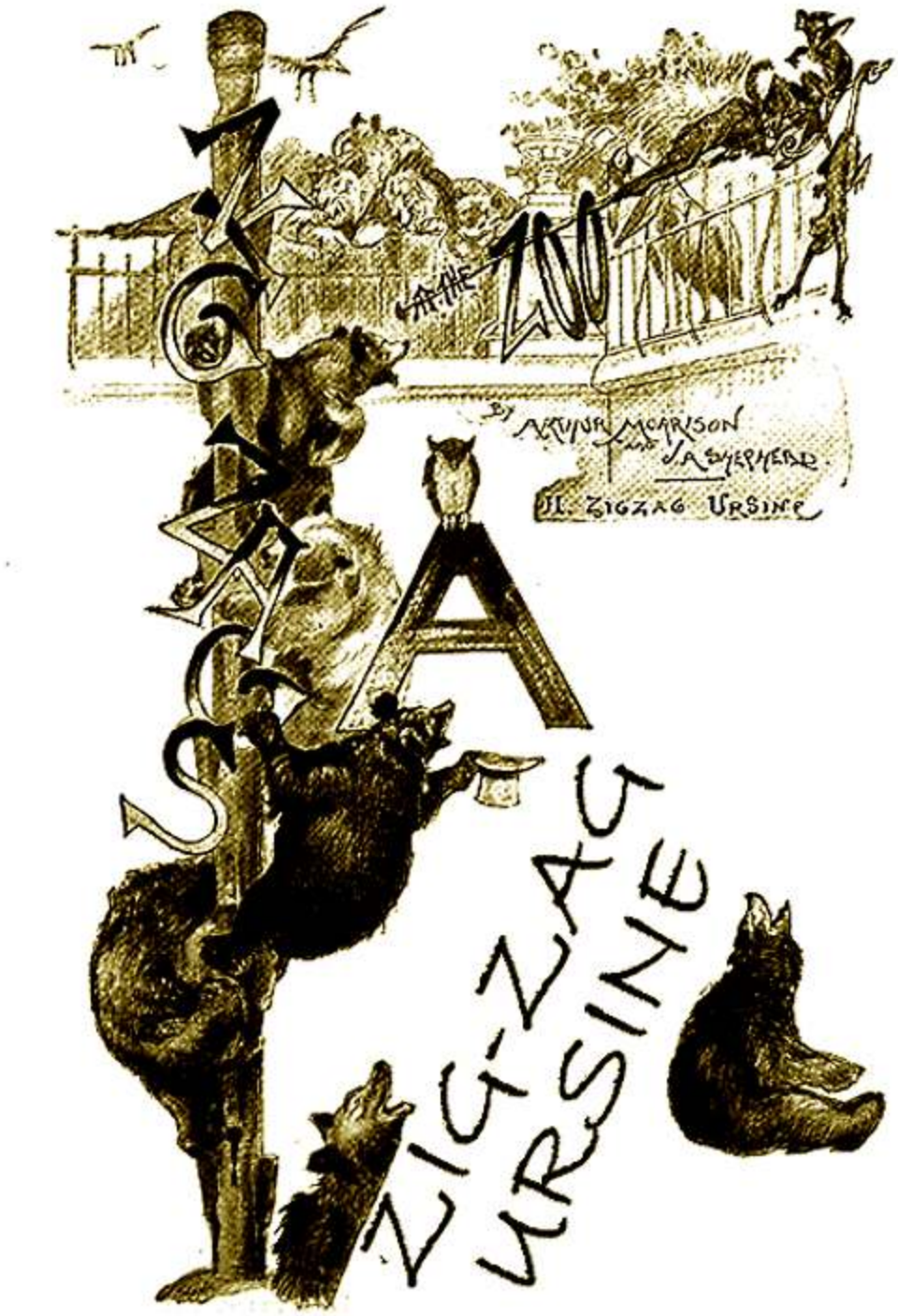


A BEAR is an adaptable creature, a philosopher every inch. He takes everything just as it comes—and doesn't readily part with it. He lives in all sorts of countries, in all manner of weather and climate, merely changing his coat a little to suit the prevailing weather. He will eat honey—when

he can get it; when he can't he consoles himself with the reflection that it is bad for the teeth. He is largely a vegetarian, except when meat falls in his way, and although innocently fond of buns, will cheerfully put up with strawberries and cream if they stray in his direction. There is a proverb inculcating the principle of catching the bear before you sell his skin. This, from a business point of view, is obviously absurd. If you can find somebody idiot enough to buy the skin first, *and pay cash*, why, take it, and let him do the catching. It will save a deal of trouble, and you will probably have a chance of selling the same skin again after the other fellow's funeral.

The bear is indeed a very respectable beast, as beasts go. And he certainly is respected in some quarters. Both the North American Indians and the Lapps reverence him too much even to mention his name in conversation; with them he is "the old man in the fur cloak" or "the destroyer."

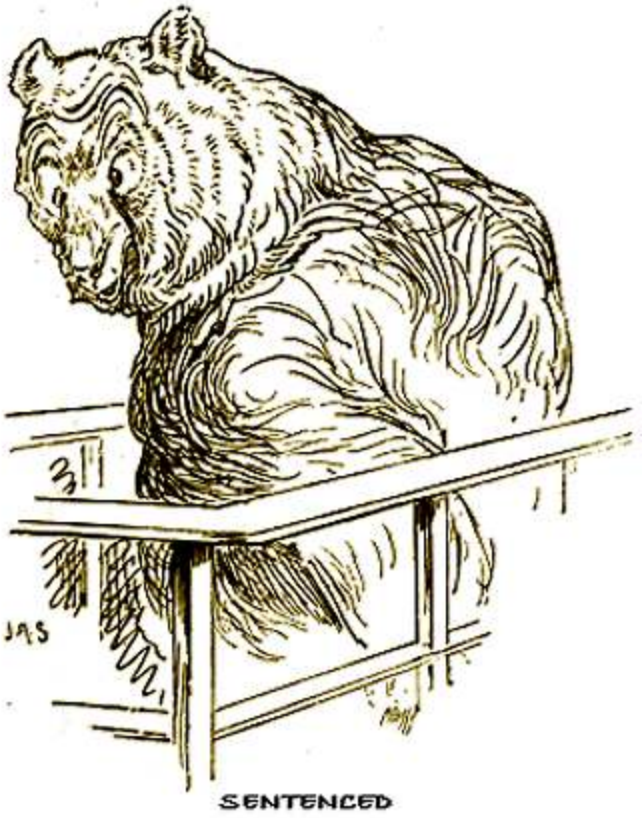
Indeed, it seems reasonable to feel a certain respect for an animal which can knock the top of your head off with a blow of his paw; but both the Indians and the Lapps carry their respect a little too far. To kill a bear and them humbly apologise to the dead body, as they do, is adding insult to injury, especially if you dine off the injured party immediately afterward. Neither is it likely to propitiate Bruin if a dozen men, while prodding him vigorously with a dozen spears, express their regret for the damage they are doing, and hope that he'll pardon the liberty. All this they do in sober earnest, and even go so far as to proffer a polite request that he won't hurt them. If he ever accedes to this, it is probably because he is confused by the contemplation of such colossal "cheek."

All this is galling enough, though otherwise intended, but contumely reaches its climax when dinner comes on. It would be annoying enough to the shade of the departed gentleman in fur to hear that he made a capital joint, or the reverse; still, it is what might be expected. But this sort of thing they studiously refrain from saying. They talk with enthusiasm of the poor bear's high moral qualities—often inventing them for the occasion, it is to be feared—and, presumably talking at his ghost, tell each other that it was most considerate and indulgent of him to let them kill him so easily. Now this is worse than laying on insult with a trowel; it is piling it on with a shovel, and rubbing it in with a brick.

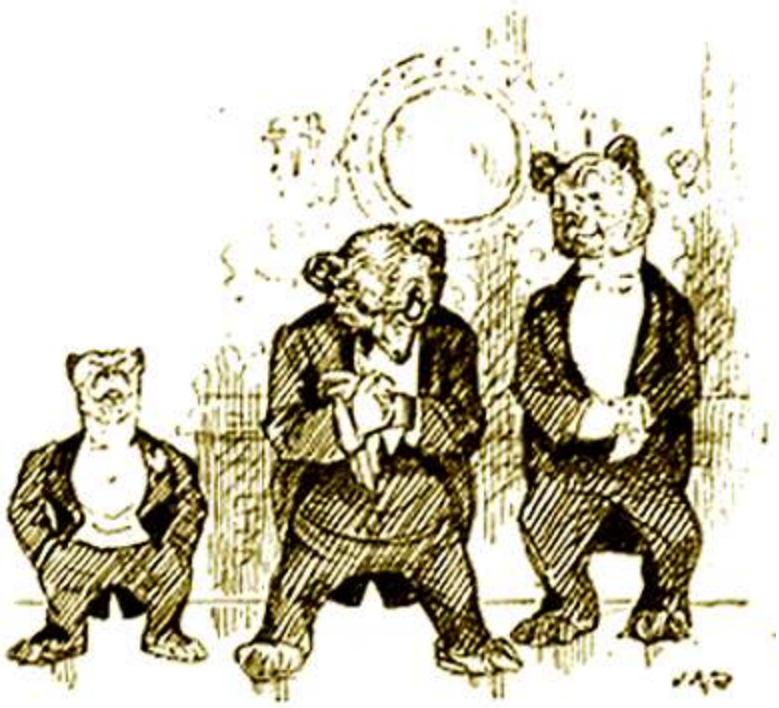
IN THE POLICE COURT

Contact with man ruins the respectability of the bear. He gets dissipated and raffish, and appears in the dock at police-courts. He associates with low companions—unclean-looking foreigners—who bang him sorely about the ribs with sticks to make him dance. They keep him badly, and he grows bony and mangy. He retaliates upon them by getting loose, frightening people, and breaking things. Then, when he is brought before a magistrate, they have to pay his fine. Sometimes they get into prison over him. The end is always the same—a bear who begins by associating with these people always turns up at the police-court before long, and once there, he comes again and again—just in the manner of the old offenders at Marlborough-street. Even in the innocent old times, when Bidpai wrote (or plagiarised) his fables, association with man made a fool of a bear. Witness the fable of the gardener's bear, who, zealous about a fly on his master's face, brought a paw upon it with all his force,

and knocked off an indispensable piece of the worthy gardener's head.



There is nothing whatever recorded against that gardener's character; he probably lived a most exemplary life, and won prizes at all the prehistoric horticultural shows in India—although it might not be strictly correct for a American to say there were no flies on him. But his society made a great ass of that bear.



There was once a belief that bears licked their cubs into shape. If there be anything in this, all the bears in my acquaintance came of very negligent mothers—or, perhaps, of mothers who tried the other sort of licking. They have strength, sagacity, stupidity, gloom, cheerfulness, teeth, hair, claws, position, magnitude, and big feet; but nothing at all like shape. This is why they are able to indulge in such a rich variety of attitudes of rest. With so convenient a want of shape, a bear may be put upon the ground as you please, and so he will lie, without rolling. A bear rests or sleeps just as he falls, as you shall see on any warm day here at the Zoo. Usually, however, he makes an attempt to spread his feet against something. What this is it doesn't matter, so long as he nay reach it with the flat of his foot; he is never perfectly safe, he feels, unless there is a firm foundation for that very large area of sole; considerations of natural gravity he doesn't stop to think about. He has a deal of