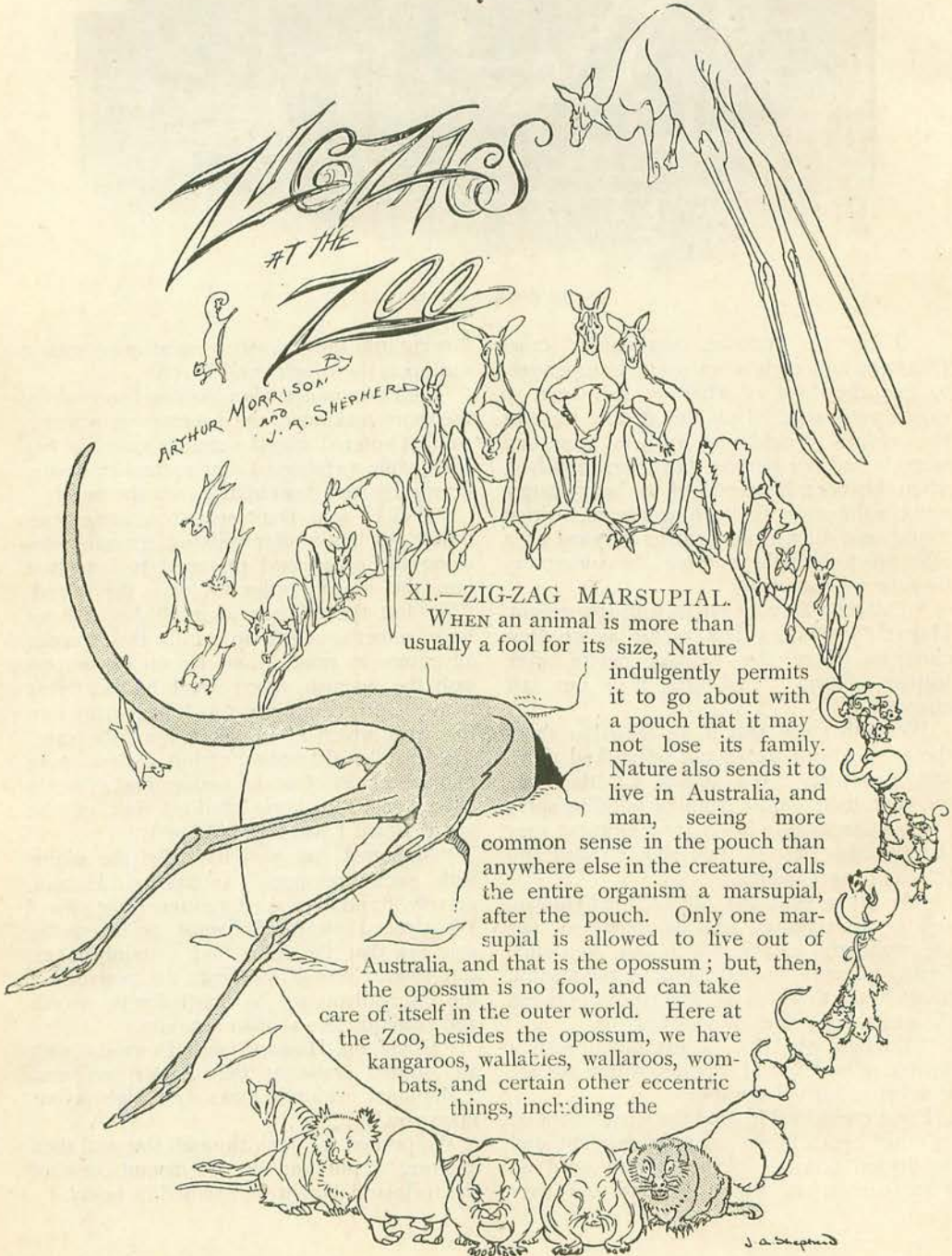


WETAS

AT THE

ZOO

By
ARTHUR MORRISON
AND
J. A. SHEPHERD



XI.—ZIG-ZAG MARSUPIAL.

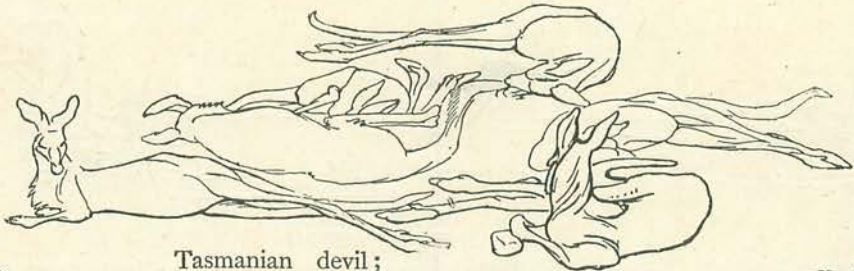
WHEN an animal is more than usually a fool for its size, Nature

indulgently permits it to go about with a pouch that it may not lose its family. Nature also sends it to live in Australia, and man, seeing more

common sense in the pouch than anywhere else in the creature, calls the entire organism a marsupial, after the pouch. Only one marsupial is allowed to live out of

Australia, and that is the opossum; but, then, the opossum is no fool, and can take care of itself in the outer world. Here at the Zoo, besides the opossum, we have kangaroos, wallabies, wallaroos, wombats, and certain other eccentric things, including the

J. A. Shepherd

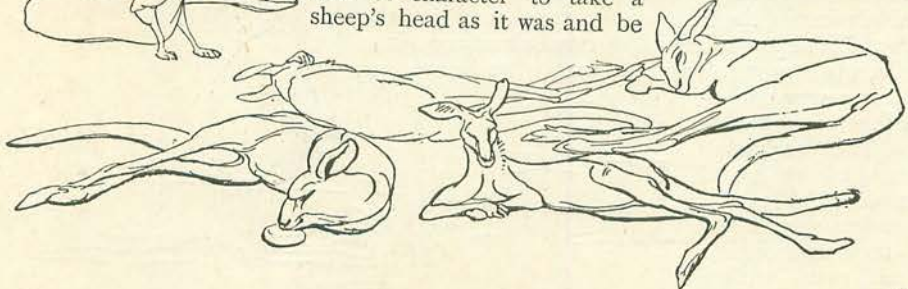
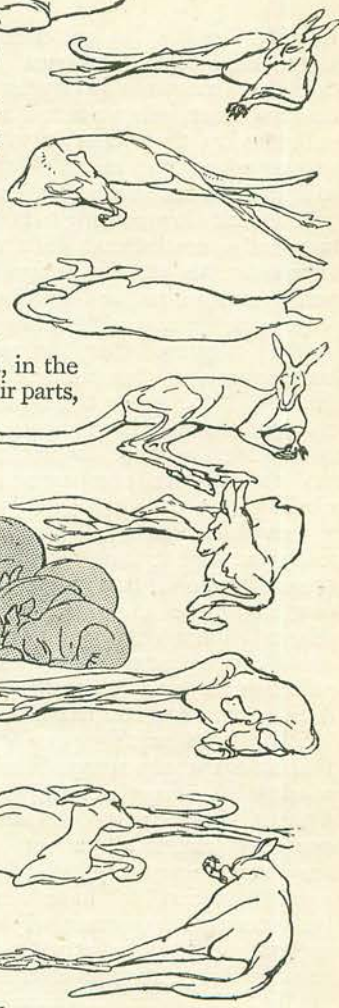
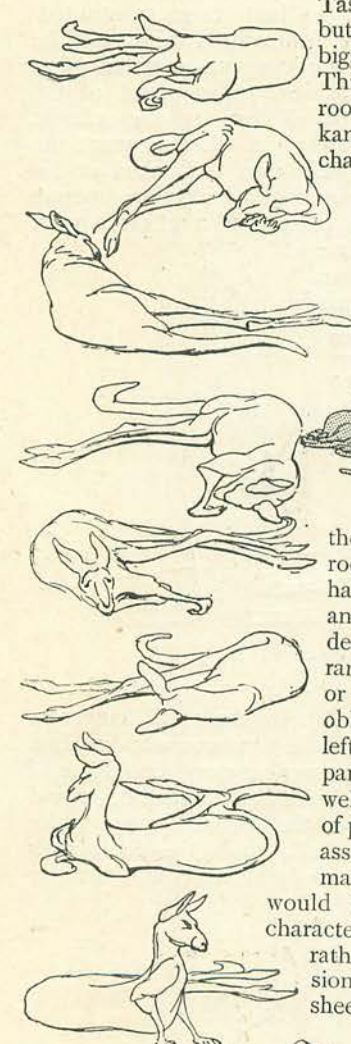


Tasmanian devil; but none is a bigger fool than the biggest marsupial, the kangaroo. This is natural, because he has most room to store his imbecility. The kangaroo's general weakness of character is visible all over him.

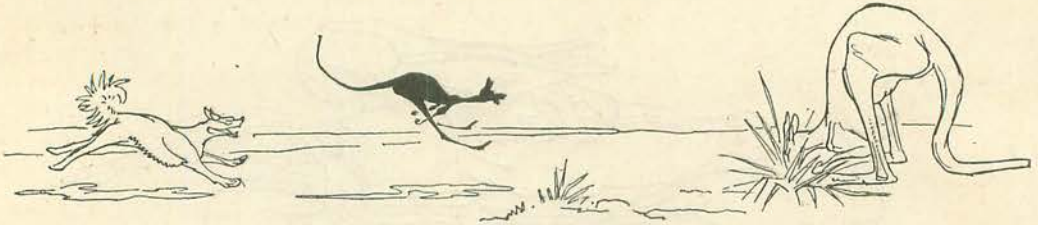
He has never quite made up his mind what to be even now; he is nothing but a flabby compromise.

There would appear to be two plausible theories about the construction of the kangaroo; when, in the beginning, the animals chose their parts,

the kangaroo may have been first, and weakly and indecisively chose at random, of no set purpose; or he may have been last, and obliged to put up with what was left. I incline to the first theory, partly because the kangaroo is well furnished as regards quality of parts, although they are oddly assorted, and partly because to make an indecisive selection would be just in accord with his character. He fancied a sheep's head, rather, but hadn't enough decision of character to take a sheep's head as it was and be



J. A. Simpson



THE WICKED DINGO DOG; OR,

thankful for it. He preferred a donkey's ears to the sheep's, so had them substituted. Even then, some mistrust of the boldness of the design intimidated him, and he cautiously compromised by having them small. The only part of a kangaroo or wallaby that has the least independence about it is the tail; and the wallabies are so proud of the individuality, that they sit with their tails extended before them all day: and the colonist acknowledges the merit of the kangaroo's tail by making soup of it. Let us grant the kangaroo his tail, since it is the only thing that is unmistakably his own. Abashed at his own temerity in venturing to take an independent tail, all the kangaroo's other selections became hopelessly demoralized. He took a grasshopper's hind legs, and plagiarized a rat's fore-paws. Obviously, he got the design of his coat partly from the rabbit and partly from the rat, and the idea of his pouch from the bookmaker.

Now, it is a noticeable thing, illustrative of the mental stagnation of the kangaroo, that, having adopted the crude idea of the bookmaker's or 'bus-conductor's pouch, he—or, rather, she—through all the generations, has never developed an improvement on that pouch, either by evolution, selection, or natural adaptation. Even in these days of improvement, the kangaroo's pouch has no separate compartment for silver. Of course it is mainly used to carry the family in, but in any really intelligent and enterprising class of animals that pouch would long ago have improved and developed, through the countless ages, into a convenient perambulator, with rubber tires and a leather hood.



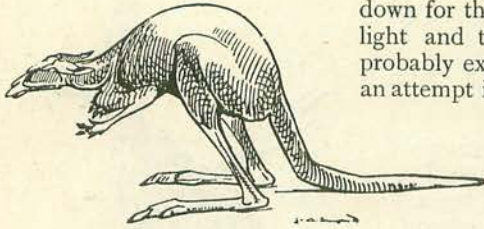
INNOCENCE

As it is, the kangaroo has not so much as added a patent clasp.

Still, in its merely primitive form, the pouch is found useful by the small kangaroo. It is an ever-ready refuge from the prowling dingo dog, and any little kangaroo who breaks a window has always a capital hiding-place handy. Indeed, the young kangaroo would fare ill without this retreat, because any other cradle the mother, being a kangaroo, would probably forget all about, and lose. It is only because the pouch hangs under her very nose that she remembers she has a family at all. All the kangaroo's strength seems to have settled down into the hind legs and the tail, leaving the other parts comparatively weak, and the head superlatively useless, except as an attachment for the mouth. One would imagine that in the period which has elapsed since the Creation the feeblest-minded of animals would have had time to arrive at some final choice in the matter of coat-colour; but the kangaroo hasn't. He never makes up his mind about anything; he begins life in a pale-grey colour; in a year or two he changes his mind and turns very dark—darker than either his father or his mother. The originality pleases him for a little while, and then he gets doubtful of his choice, and makes a wretched compromise—the kangaroo is a compromise all over—settling



PRESERVED.

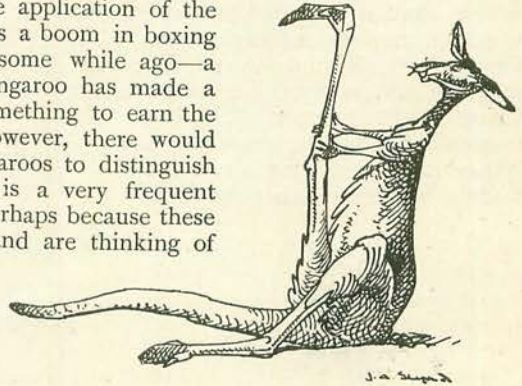


WRESTLING PRACTICE.

down for the rest of his life to a tint midway between the light and the dark. If he lived a little longer he would probably experiment in blue. As it is, he sometimes makes an attempt in pink—with powder. Only the male kangaroo uses this cosmetic, and where he finds it and how he keeps it is a mystery; he doesn't put it on his face—he devotes it entirely to the complexion of his chest and stomach.

Australians call a full-grown male kangaroo a "boomer":

why, I don't know. I could understand the application of the term in this country, where such a thing as a boom in boxing kangaroos has been heard of, and—this some while ago—a "white kangaroo" boom. The boxing kangaroo has made a very loud boom indeed, and has done something to earn the title of "boomer." Here, at the Zoo, however, there would seem to be little ambition among the kangaroos to distinguish themselves as boxing boomers; but there is a very frequent attitude suggestive of wrestling practice—perhaps because these would-be boomers have muddled things, and are thinking of the wrestling lion. Personally, I am not anxious either to box or to wrestle with a kangaroo; for the beast has a plaguey unpleasant hind foot, armed with a claw like a marline-spike, and a most respectable ability to kick a hole in a stranger with it. It is a kind of weapon that ordinary boxing and wrestling systems



A NASTY WEAPON.

don't allow for, and not at all an amusing sort of

thing to have lashing about among one's internal machinery. I don't wish to attribute any unsportsmanlike proceedings to the kangaroo now before the public, but to point out that the indiscriminate election of kangaroos into boxing clubs should be discouraged; especially of raw young kangaroos, ready to put on the gloves with anybody and to lose their tempers. Beware of kangaroo uppercuts. Indeed, the boxing kangaroo should properly wear two pairs of gloves, and the bigger and softer pair should go upon his hind feet. For his is a form of *la savate* which admits neither of duck, guard, nor counter; and leaves its signature in a form long to be remembered and hard to stitch up.

The white kangaroo was much



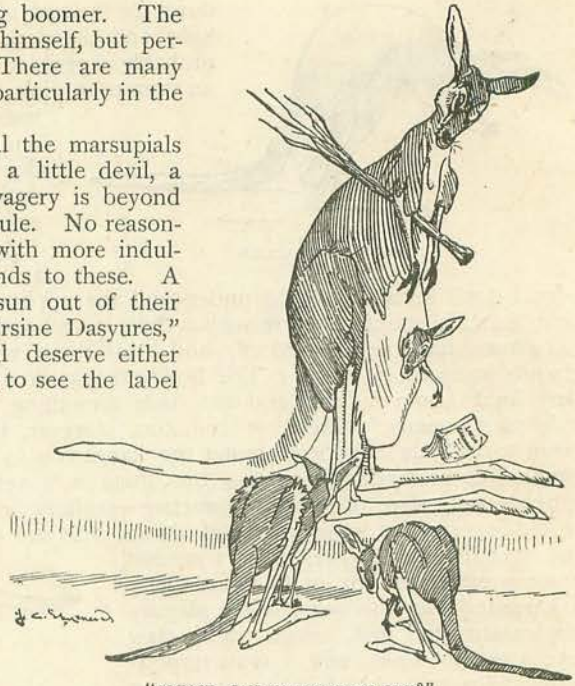
RAW YOUTH—"YES, WILL I."

cowering and looking miserable ever since in terror of his own independence; he looks only a sort of unhappy white rabbit, overgrown in the hinder half. But there is encouragement

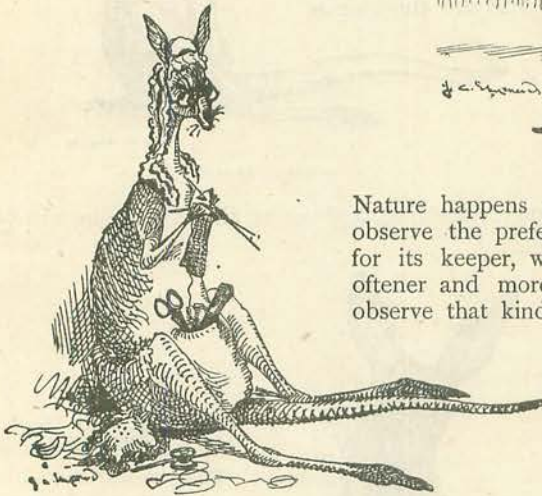
less of a boomer. He dared to be original as to colour, and has been shivering and

to be got from the case of the boxing boomer. The kangaroo will never become clever of himself, but perhaps the showman may teach him. There are many comic opportunities in the kangaroo—particularly in the pouch. Let the showman see to it.

The most entirely objectionable of all the marsupials is the Tasmanian devil. It is only a little devil, a couple of feet or so long, but its savagery is beyond measuring by anything like a two-foot rule. No reasonable devils could wish to be treated with more indulgence than the Zoological Society extends to these. A rolling blind is provided to keep the sun out of their eyes, and they are politely labelled "Ursine Dasyures," for fear of offending them. They ill deserve either attention, and at any rate I should like to see the label changed. The function of the Tasmanian devil in the economy of Nature is to bite, scratch, tear and mangle whatever other work of



"PLEASE, CAN TOMMY COME OUT?"



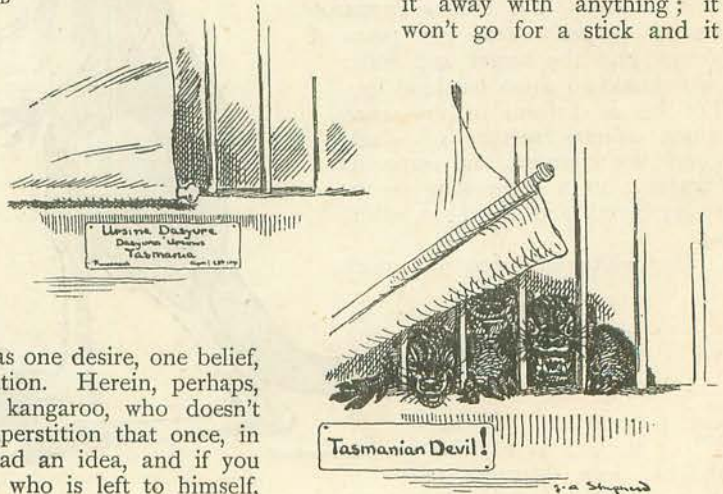
AN OLD MAID

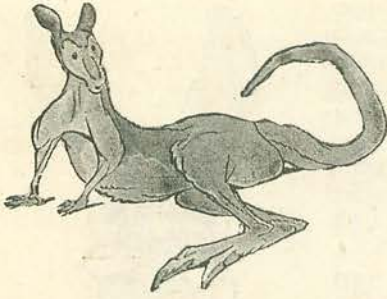
Nature happens to be within reach. It is touching to observe the preference exhibited by the Tasmanian devil for its keeper, who feeds it; it tries to bite him much oftener and more savagely than anybody else. Thus you observe that kindness has some effect, even with the Tasmanian devil. Of course, by its nature, it resents kindness more than anything else, but it will also attack anybody for cruelty, or indifference, or admiration, or curiosity, or for looking at it, or for not looking at it, or any other injury. You can't drive it away with anything; it won't go for a stick and it

won't go for a gun; nevertheless it will go for you, like three hundred wild cats.

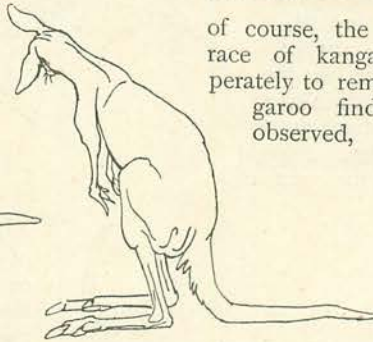
The Tasmanian method of taming it is to blow it into space with a heavy charge of buckshot; and this seems to be the only way of rendering it quite harmless. In

life the Tasmanian devil has one desire, one belief, one idea—general devastation. Herein, perhaps, he is the superior of the kangaroo, who doesn't have ideas. There is a superstition that once, in distant ages, a kangaroo had an idea, and if you closely observe a kangaroo who is left to himself,

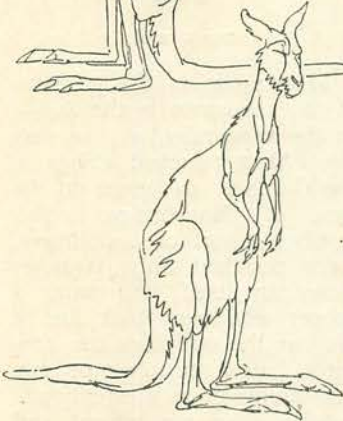




you may see something in that superstition. Ever since the time of that idea (which,



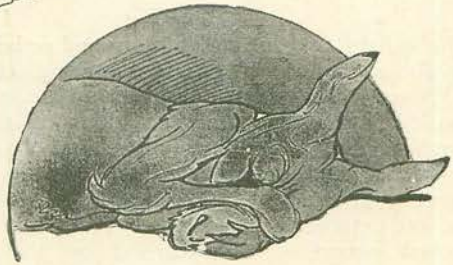
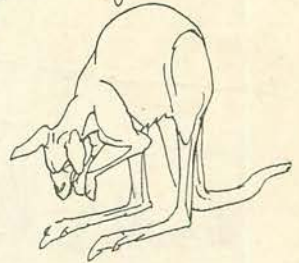
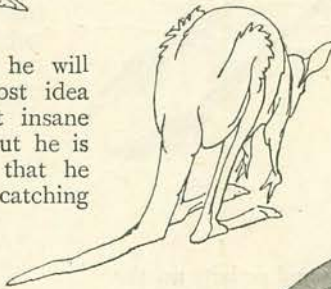
of course, the kangaroo forgot) the whole race of kangaroos has been trying desperately to remember it. Whenever a kangaroo finds himself alone, and unobserved, he addresses himself to



recollecting that idea. He gazes thoughtfully at his paws, finding no inspiration. Then he tries the vacant air above him, with equal ill-success. He brown-studies at the fence, at the



ground, at his own tail; he will never, never rescue that lost idea (which is probably a most insane one, not worth rescuing), but he is always persuading himself that he is on the very point of catching it; frowning and turning his head aside as though the words were in his mouth but wouldn't come off the tongue. You will also notice that he wrestles desperately with it in his sleep, with his fore paw over his nose. If in his waking efforts he sees you watching him, he instantly assumes an air of alert wisdom, intended to convey the belief that he has known all about the idea for years, and is only thinking about applying it in some practical way or making a book of it. But the attempt is a failure—those ears give it away. For intellectual pursuits the kangaroo is not

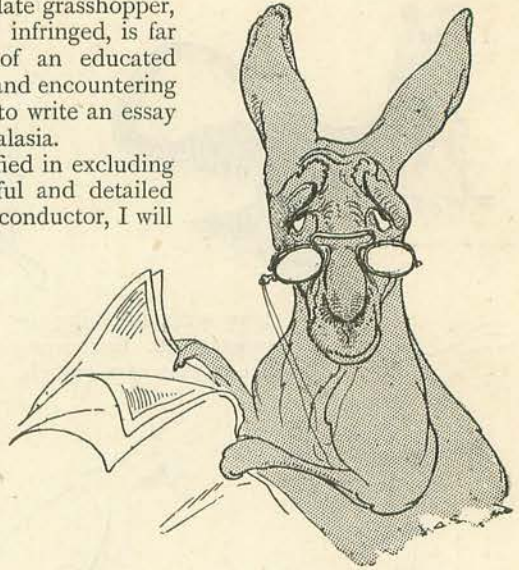


J. A. Shepherd

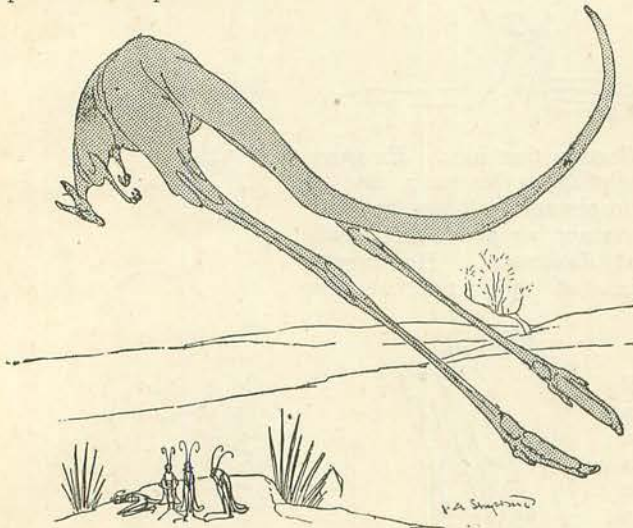
THAT IDEA.

fitted. But he *can* jump; and the disconsolate grasshopper, whose hind-leg copyright the kangaroo has infringed, is far behind the record. It is, in fact, reported of an educated West Indian that, visiting New South Wales and encountering his first kangaroo, he sat down immediately to write an essay on the unusually large grasshoppers of Australasia.

Whether or not a serious naturalist is justified in excluding from a chapter on marsupial animals a careful and detailed consideration of the bookmaker and the 'bus-conductor, I will not stay to argue. I refrain from dealing at length with these interesting creatures in this place, because of the regrettable absence of specimens from the Zoo. The conductor (*Bellpunchus familiaris*) is readily capturable in this country. The habits of the bookmakers (*marsupialis vulgaris*) may be studied, and their curious habits learned by anybody willing to incur the expense in the inclosures set apart for their exhibition at the various racecourses, where their sportive gambles are the subject of great interest (and principal) on the part of speculative inquirers.



THOSE EARS.



THE RECORD.

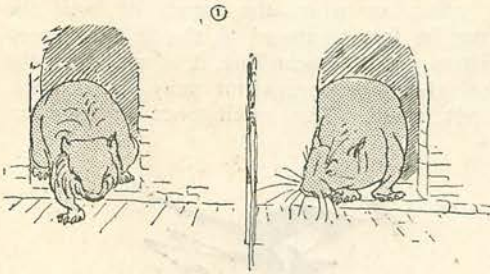
or the wallaby, and his sprightliness and activity are the sprightliness and activity of a cast-iron pig. He is slow, but I scarcely think he is quite such an ass as the kangaroo. I have even found him indulging in repartee, as you shall see. Every single movement of any part of the wombat is deliberate and well considered; it is apparently debated at great length by all the other parts, and determined upon by a formal resolution, duly proposed, seconded, and carried by the complete animal properly assembled. Once the motion is carried, nothing can stop it. If the wombat's travels are crossed by a river, he merely walks into it, across the bottom, and out at the other side. Here, in lairs side by side,

Mansbridge is the guardian of the kangaroos in the Zoo—or the kangaruler, as one may say. Most pouched things in the Gardens are given to the care of Mansbridge, which involves a sort of compliment, for a pouched thing is never clever by itself, and wants a keeper who can think for it. He has the wallabies, the kangaroo hares, the kangaroo rats (mad things these, greater hotch-potches than the others), and the wombats. The wombat cannot jump like the kangaroo

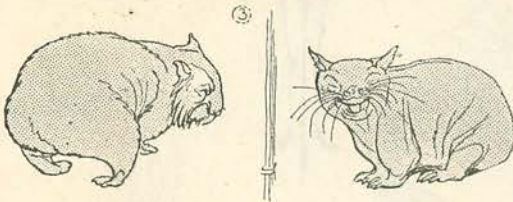
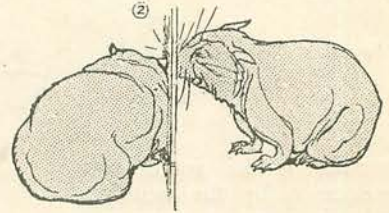


THE KANGARULER.

live a common wombat and a hairy-nosed wombat. They don't come out much in daylight, and they had been here some time before they found themselves both out for an airing together. "Halloa," reflected the hairy-nosed wombat, "here is my neighbour. I'll chaff him!" and he straightway set to work to invent some facetious observation. In an hour or so an idea struck him, and, advancing to the partition bars, he said to the common wombat, "Here, I say—you're common!" and laughed uproariously. The

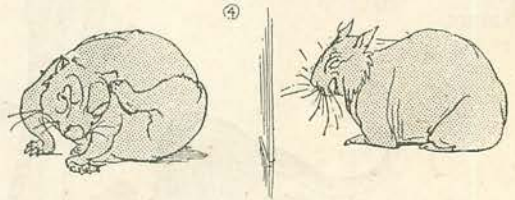


common wombat felt the sting of the remark and determined upon a crushing repartee. While the other chuckled over his achievement (about an hour

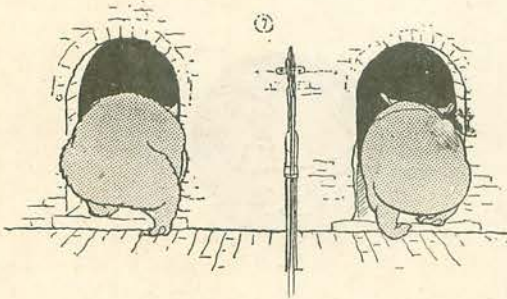
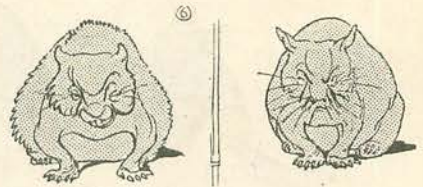
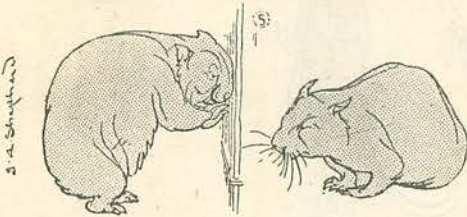


and a half) the common wombat laboriously constructed his retort. "Yah! hairy-nose!" he said, when the reply was properly finished and

polished. And then *he* chuckled, while the other thought it over. The hairy-nosed wombat thought it over and the common wombat thought it over (chuckling the while) for some hours without arriving at any more epigrams. After that they went into their dens to take a rest.



And to this day it is a matter of dispute as to which has the best of that chaffing match: and the hairy-nosed wombat is as far off a brilliant reply to the common wombat as ever,



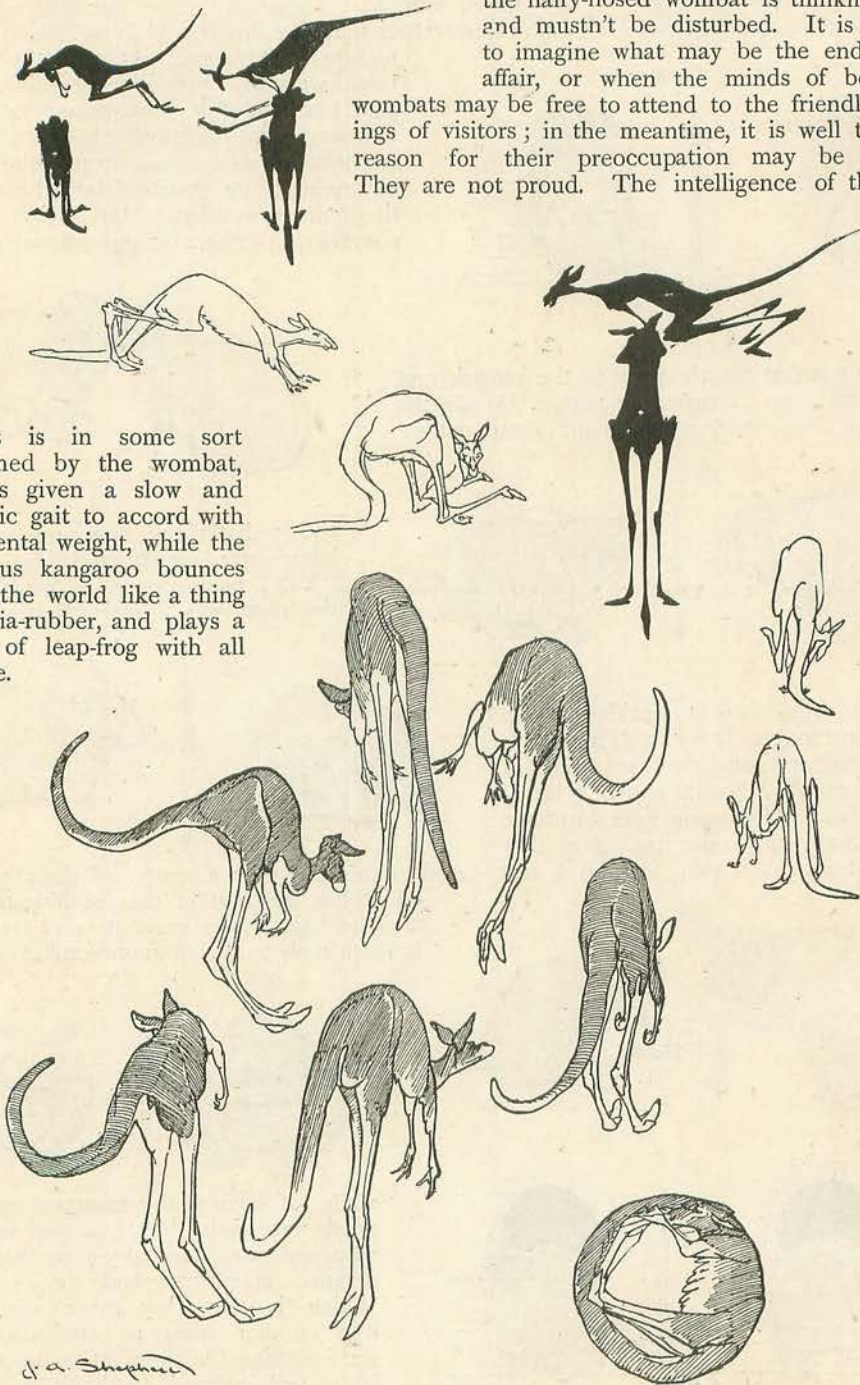
WAR OF WIT.

while, of course, the common wombat need not begin to think of another witticism until the hairy-nosed wombat invents, constructs and delivers his. Which is why they never speak to one another now, as anybody may see for himself in proof of the anecdote, if he feel inclined to doubt it. Both are good-tempered and affable in their way; but while they still have this portentous combat of wits on hand they can't afford much time and attention

for visitors. The common wombat still meditates and chuckles inwardly over his victory, and

the hairy-nosed wombat is thinking hard, and mustn't be disturbed. It is difficult to imagine what may be the end of the affair, or when the minds of both the wombats may be free to attend to the friendly greetings of visitors; in the meantime, it is well that the reason for their preoccupation may be known. They are not proud. The intelligence of the mar-

supials is in some sort redeemed by the wombat, who is given a slow and inelastic gait to accord with his mental weight, while the frivolous kangaroo bounces about the world like a thing of india-rubber, and plays a game of leap-frog with all Nature.



J. A. Shepherd