

BY
ARTHUR MORRISON
AND
J.A. SHEPHERD

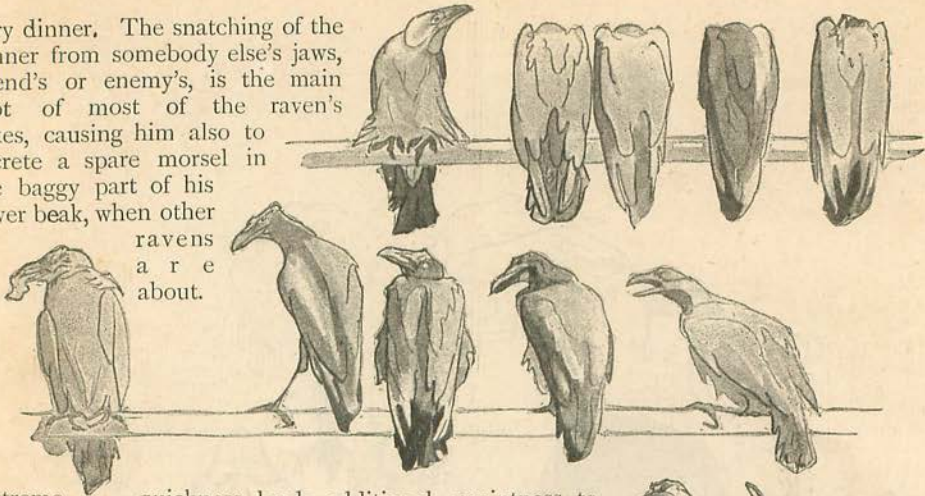
XIV.—ZIG-ZAG CORVINE.

A SENSE of humour is a vastly saving grace. Long has it saved all the Corvidæ from extermination at the hands of outraged man. The raven, the jackdaw, the magpie, the rook—what would their thievishness, their malignant mischief, earn were it not for their sense of humour? Thieves all, they are still Artful Dodgers and Charley Bateses, and we smile though they snatch our

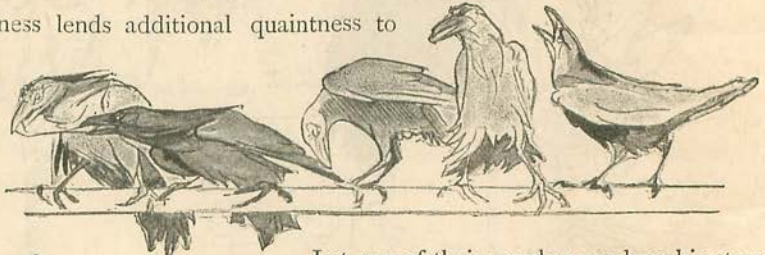
J.A. Shepherd

very dinner. The snatching of the dinner from somebody else's jaws, friend's or enemy's, is the main plot of most of the raven's jokes, causing him also to secrete a spare morsel in the baggy part of his lower beak, when other

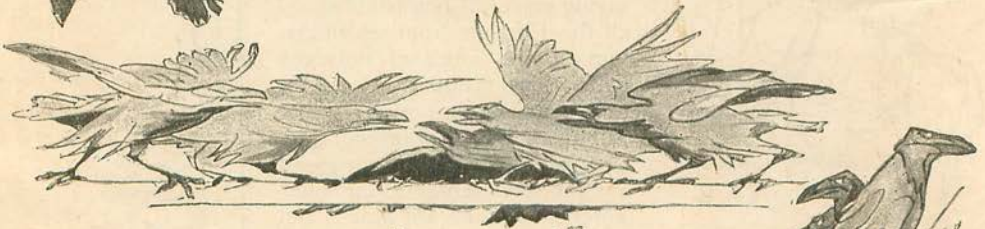
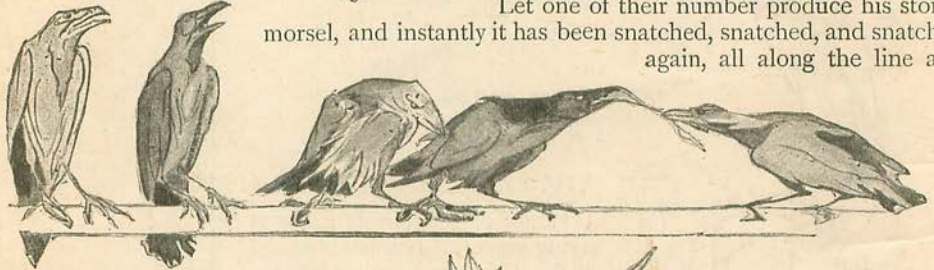
ravens
are
about.



Extreme quickness lends additional quaintness to the pranks of the raven. The ravens at the Zoo, ever changing in *personnel*, remain true to a sort of mixed game of coddam and hunt the slipper.



Let one of their number produce his stored morsel, and instantly it has been snatched, snatched, and snatched again, all along the line and



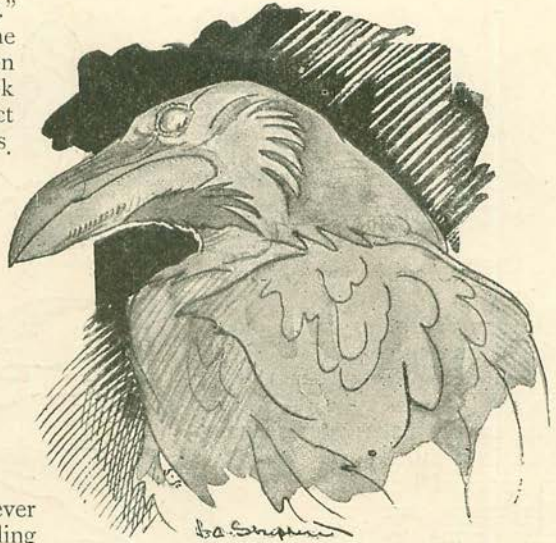
back. With whom it at last rests only one mortal creature knows—the raven who has it. In him a natural exultation struggles with an attempt to look as though he had lost the tit-bit. In the others the chagrin of loss wars with a desire to look triumphant; so that the net result is a very level appearance of general stolidity.

Sardonic joker as he is, the raven has an immense sense of personal dignity. He is the greatest of the Corvidæ, and he knows it. Not for him the scrambling hilarity of his small cousin, the jackdaw. Don't injure the raven's self-esteem, or he will be revenged, at some time or another. I have known a tame raven wait for months for an opportunity of plucking off, before a large company, the wig of a lady of doubtful age who had referred to



him disrespectfully as "that thieving beast." Also, when an innocent little boy at the Zoo has asked his mother if the raven were a blackbird, I have observed a look of indignation that carried with it a distinct threat to bite that little boy's little red legs. Never will a raven forget his dignity. Even a raven in love won't do it.

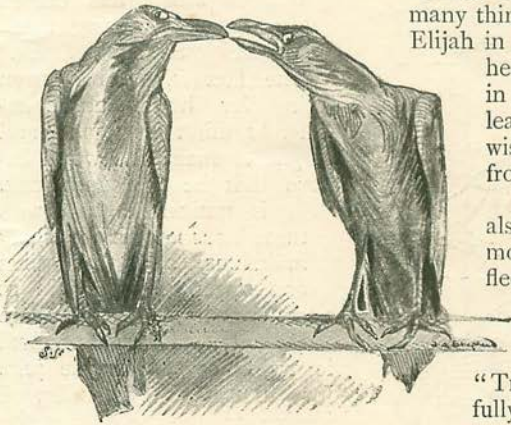
He has, after all, considerable excuse for pride. A bird on such familiar terms with the great Odin as to sit on his shoulder every evening and retail to him the day's gossip is naturally proud. One Scandinavian legend mentions two such ravens, but I imagine that they are a sort of prophetic allegory, intended to typify successive editions of the evening paper. The belief in the raven as a bird of ill-omen probably arose from the fact that he was never known to turn up anywhere without stealing something, or doing mischief in some other way; just as one may consider a nitroglycerine bomb an unlucky article to find on the cellar stairs.



AM I A BLACKBIRD!

His fame as a prophet—and he was chief of the ancient augurs—may be due to many things. Perhaps he had a wrinkle or two from Elijah in recognition of the supply of provisions; or he may even have felt a motive for his generosity in a certain fellow-feeling; which would at least seem a plausible conjecture, since otherwise it is impossible to conceive of his refraining from stealing the supplies *en route*.

Travis is the keeper of the crows' cages, as also of the great Western Aviary. He is a most surprising authority on birds, and is no fledgeling himself; he is the oldest keeper in the service, as his "No. 1" testifies, and has been here since the year 1851. I have been lingering over the name "Travis" for some time, separating it thoughtfully into T. R. Avis, with an ultimate idea of a pun, or an acrostic, or a rebus, or a



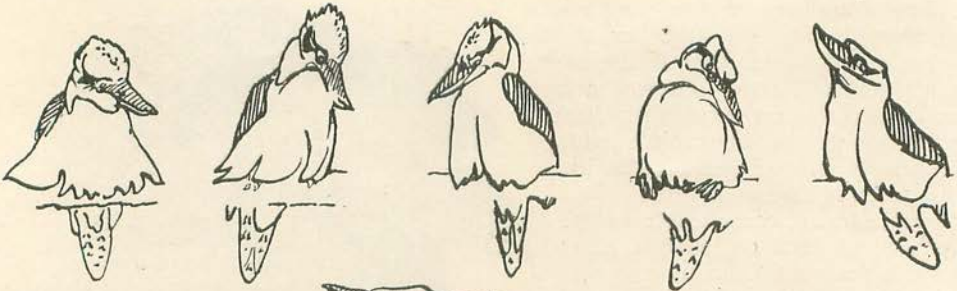
PERFUNCTORY COURTSHIP.

charade, or conundrum, or something of the kind, but have regretfully given up the notion. Still, considering his almost unique knowledge of birds—not to mention the ability of his brother as a bird-stuffer—I think Travis might arrange, by deed-poll, for some such name as *Terrae Rara Avis*, if the equal mutilation of name and catch-phrase be tolerated.

Among the many curious birds in the domain of Travis is the laughing jackass. Now, there are several reasons why something should be said here of the laughing jackass. In the first place, this is a Zig-zag, and since it is headed "Zig-zag Corvine," it is proper and in accordance with the correct spirit of Zig-zaggedness that something should be included that isn't corvine at all. Moreover, it is fitting that a bird which is called a jackass and is indeed a kingfisher, and being a kingfisher doesn't catch fish, should be classed with something that is neither jackass nor king-

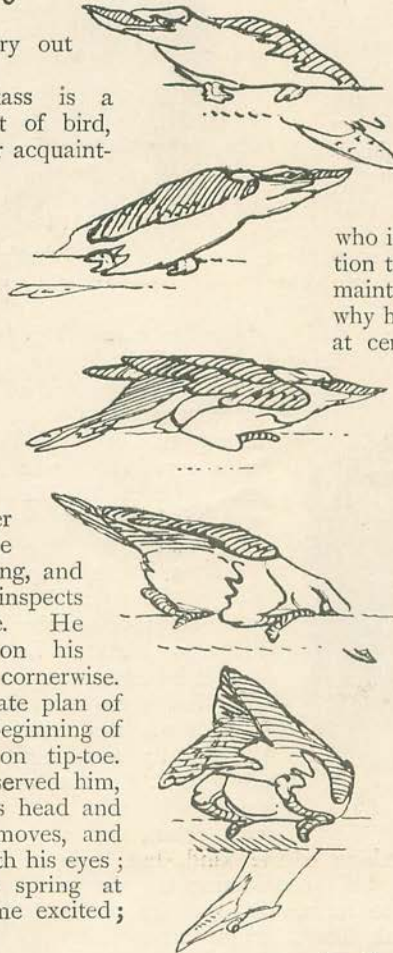


NUMBER ONE.



finser nor fish, to carry out the original principle.

The laughing jackass is a broad low-comedy sort of bird, who usually makes your acquaintance in a little game of spoof of his own. He knows that you have come to the cage to hear him laugh, so he won't do it. But in order to keep you there in expectancy as long as possible, he pretends to have discovered an enemy, or something to eat, or the ghost of some other jackass, close by. He stares intently at nothing, and then turns round and inspects it on the other side. He crouches cautiously on his perch and looks at it cornerwise. He organizes an elaborate plan of strategy, and makes a beginning of approaching nothing on tip-toe. He finds that it has observed him, and forthwith ducks his head and looks out warily. It moves, and he follows it intently with his eyes; he seems about to spring at nothing, and you become excited;



when he suddenly lets it go and grins at you, and you realize that you are sold.

The laughing jackass is not a distinguished joker, like the raven. He is a very frantic sort of buffoon; one who imagines he has a funny reputation to maintain, and who strains to maintain it at all hazards. Which is why he bursts into his demoniac laugh at certain regular times of the day—

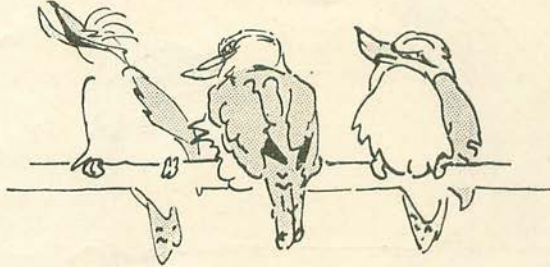
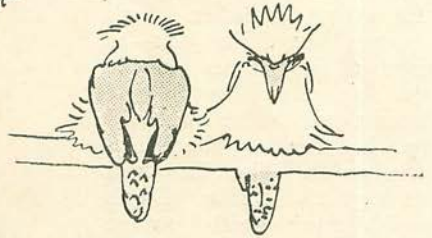
a habit which has earned him the unflattering name of the "Settlers' Clock."

The fact is, he has been trying for hours, unsuccessfully, to think of a joke, and laughs to make the world believe that he has made one.

It is noticeable that with these birds laughing is highly infectious, and that when one starts the rest join at once, each trying to outscreeam the others. Every individual is trying to claim the joke for himself. Personally, I incline to the belief that the laughing jackass, as a tribe, has only one joke. Mutual admiration societies are formed, and the members

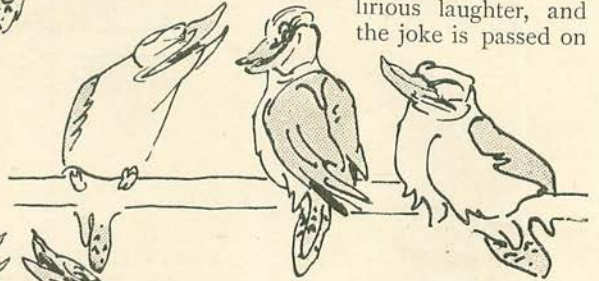


tell each other this joke in turn, and laugh unanimously. You may see the system in operation here. One bird will burst upon a few friends with the air of a breathless discoverer and a vast number of chuckles. He tells the



ancestral joke, in confidence, to jack-ass the second. Then the two scream and choke with delirious laughter, and the joke is passed on

to jackass the third, and so forth—and fifth, and sixth—till every jack-ass is screaming for a minute together, till the regular amount of mutual admiration has been ex-



ended, and they stop suddenly and cock their beaks demurely for the approbation of visitors.

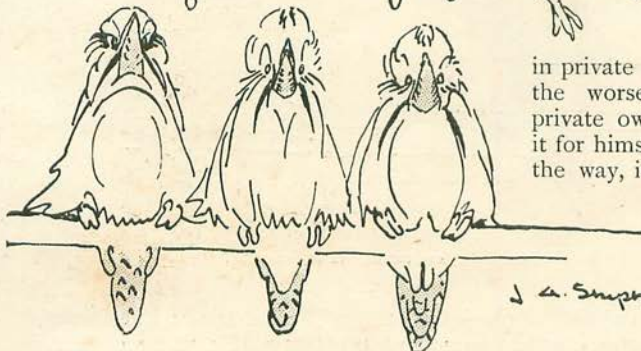
For the laughing jack-ass's own sake, I wouldn't introduce him to a raven; because the jackass would be sure to repeat the joke

to his new acquaintance, and the raven, a sardonic and superior joker, would be apt to deal savagely with him; and this more because of the badness of the joke than its age. I know a raven named Elijah (there would appear to

have been some confusion of Scriptural history at his christening) who would be a bad subject for the laughing jackass's joke.

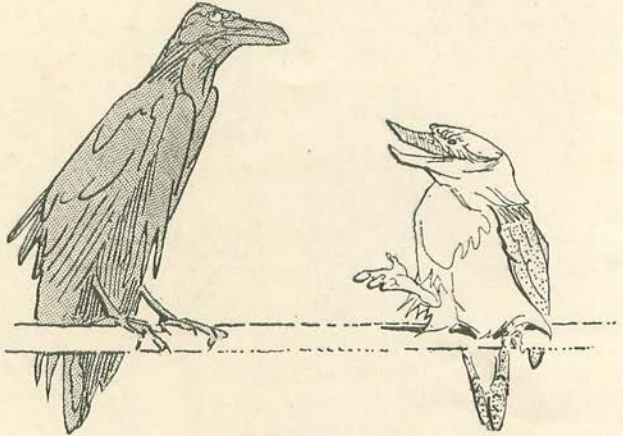
He is not at the Zoo, but in private ownership, which is a great deal the worse in general devilment for the private owner, although he hasn't discovered it for himself yet. Elijah's chief delight, by the way, is to run loose in a flower garden

or a conservatory, where the surroundings may be reduced to a salad in about five minutes. "Do you know why they call me a laughing jackass?" *Dacelo gigantea* might ask Elijah;



J. A. Simpson

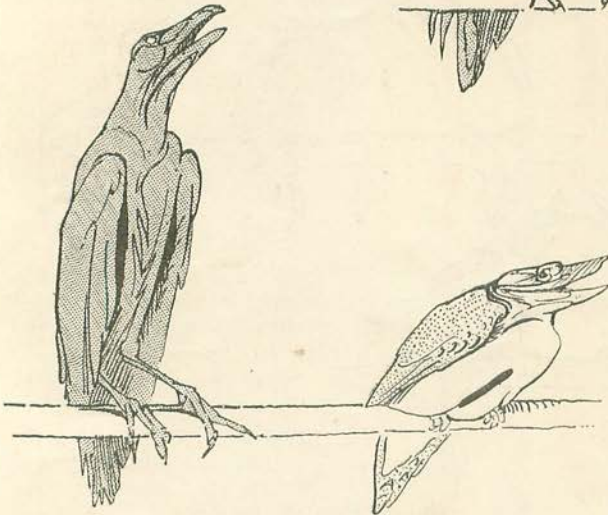
for this conundrum, I am convinced, is the ancestral wheeze. "Perhaps it's because you're a jackass to laugh so much," Elijah would say, severely. "No, you're wrong!" would scream that fatuous kingfisher. "It's because they think Jack—as good as any other name! Ha! ha! How's that? Isn't Jackass good as his master?" and he would guffaw deliriously while Elijah sharpened his big beak. "H'm," Elijah would grunt, with savage calmness, when the laugh was over. "Just make another joke like that, will you?" And the unhappy jackass



A CONUNDRUM.

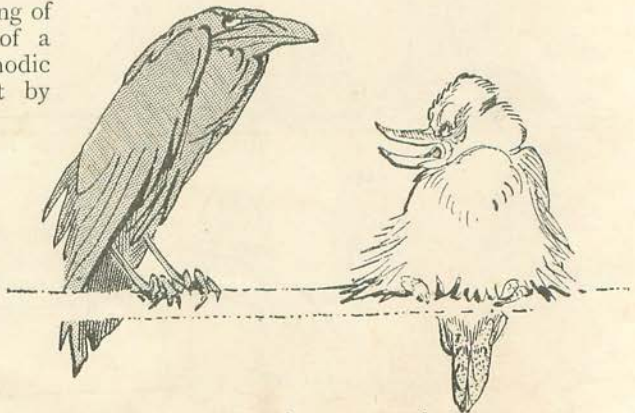
would have to save himself as best he might.

The laughing jackass is all very well as a chorus, but he can't sustain a separate low-comedy part. The raven can, the jackdaw and the magpie can, the jay can, and even the rook and the ordinary crow have their humour-some talents. The chaplain crow becomes a very passable Stiggins, under the influence of the sun, which acts as his pineapple rum. Hot sunshine opens the mouth of the



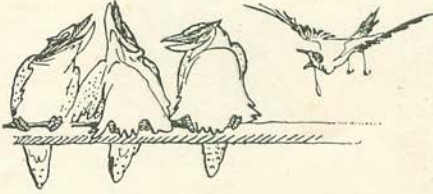
HA! HA!

chaplain crow, and causes a rolling of the head and eyes, suggestive of a lachrymose sermon; and a spasmodic croak that is an overcharged rant by itself. You grow more serious at each step nearer the chaplain crow on these occasions, and you pull up with a start at the thought of a collection. I am not sure that much of his distress is not caused by the laughing jackasses, who have an impious practice of laughing at their conundrum on Sunday. There is a temptation to call the three worst offenders among the jackasses Tom, and Bob, and Billy, and the chaplain crow Sir Macklin, by compliment or with apologies to the "Bab Ballads"; but, in good truth, there is no other name for the chaplain crow but Stiggins. His white choker is

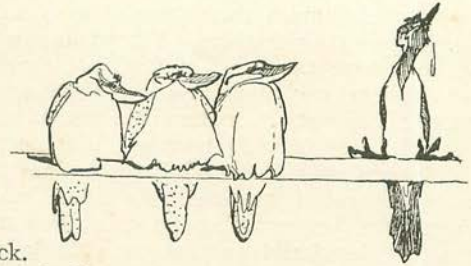


ANOTHER? IS HE SAVAGE?

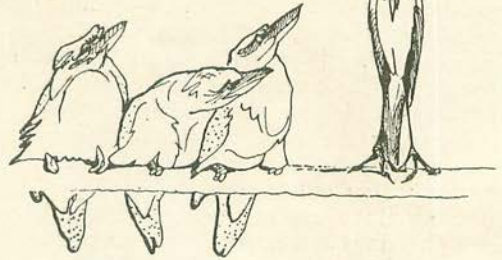
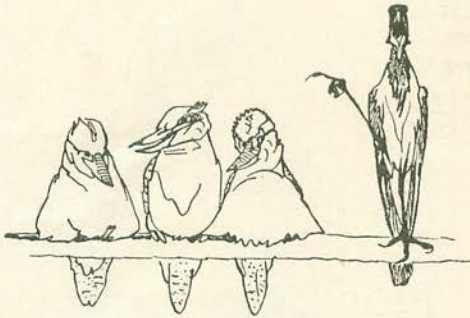
His white choker is



ragged and soiled and pulled askew on his neck.

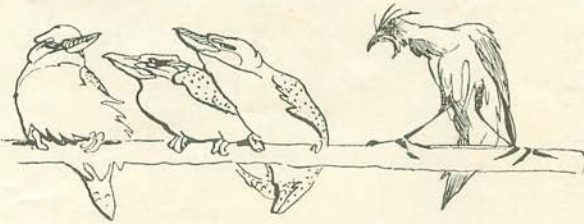


You look at him for long with an indefinite conviction that something is wanting in his equipment. A red



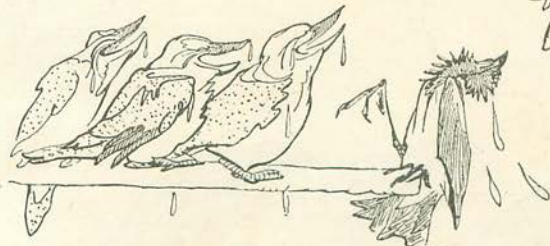
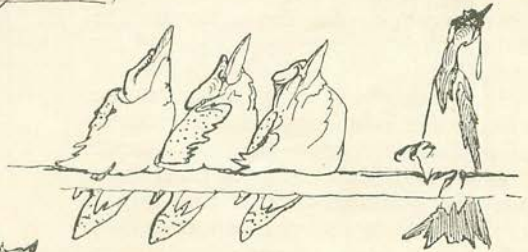
beak would be an improvement, certainly, and to secure it a cross with the chough

might be tried ; but what you really miss in Stiggins is a black bottle and a bad umbrella.



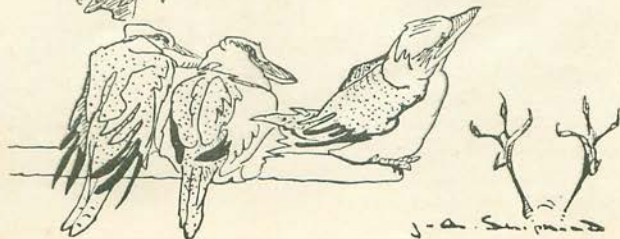
The raven was once white, Ovid tells us, but Apollo turned him black

for tale-bearing. The rook and the crow must have told tales, too, unless Apollo condemned the lot at once, from un-



certainty as to the actual culprit. The magpie and the chaplain crow are only partly black — offence not specified. Perhaps they told white

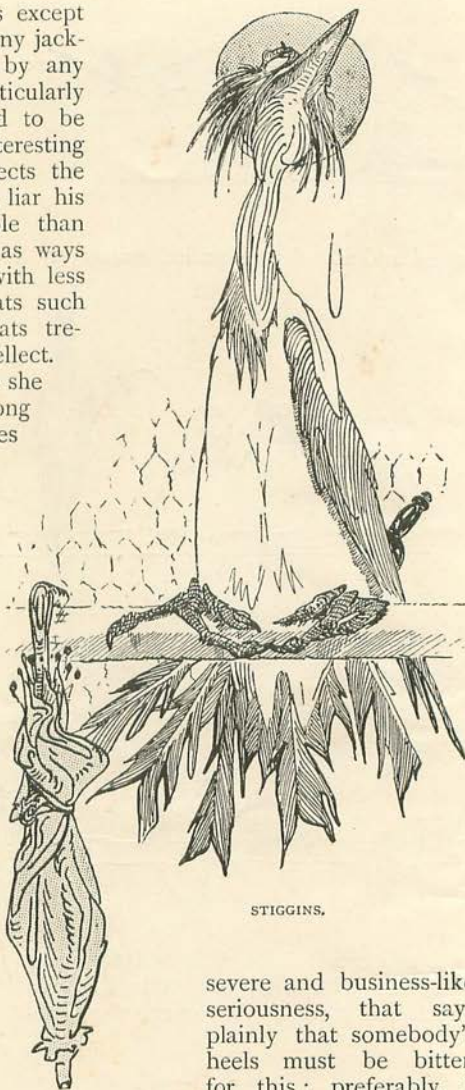
lies. Here at the Zoo are two perfectly white jackdaws, and I have spent some time in an effort to discover for what conspicuously virtuous exploit they have been so distinguished. I can find nothing in their histories



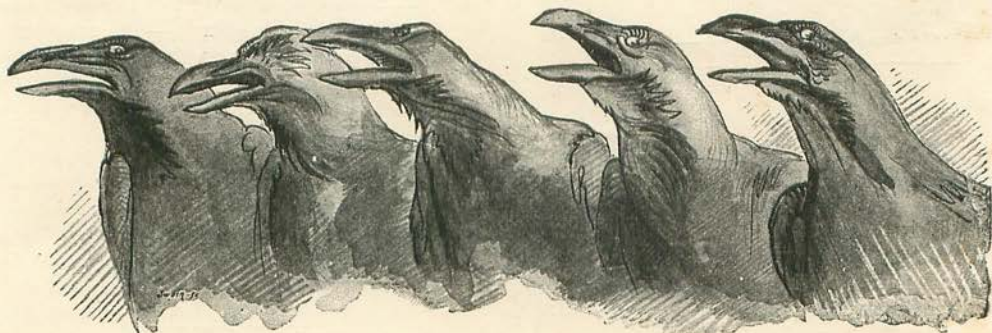
WICKED TOM AND BOB AND BILLY.

greatly to distinguish them from other jackdaws except the colour of their feathers. I have known many jackdaws and have possessed a few, but cannot, by any effort, imagine one of them doing anything particularly virtuous; jackdaws by nature are not intended to be pious. I have a jackdaw now who is a most interesting and pleasing thief, liar, and bully, but he neglects the more usual moral qualities. As a thief and a liar his performances are probably no more remarkable than those of other jackdaws, but as a bully he has ways of his own. He bullies every living thing with less brains than himself, irrespective of size, and eats such of them as are small enough. He hectors cats tremendously—merely by force of superior intellect. When a cat perceives a bird—the size of some she is in the habit of trying to catch—pelting headlong toward her down a garden-path, with furious eyes and beak, shouting “Hullo, Jack! Shut up! Shut up! Come along, old girl! Hi! hi! hi!”—that cat has some excuse for hastily retiring over the wall to think things over; and Jack cocks his head and chuckles. He bullies dogs when they will allow it; when he meets one that won’t, he finds a safe perch and abuses him violently. He will even bully a housemaid who is afraid of having her heels pecked. Once he went on a visit and tried to bully Elijah, but that was very nearly being another tale. Elijah is not the sort of bird anyone would bully for pastime, and Jack found speed as useful as intellect, for once in a way. But if he came to the Zoo to-morrow, he would probably begin by bullying Jung Perchad.

The raven was never meant to be bullied. He is a wag, certainly, but a wag of a satanic sort. His very chuckle is fierce; and when the heat makes him open his mouth to pant, it isn’t with a lachrymation, as the chaplain crow, nor with a grin, as the magpie, but with a



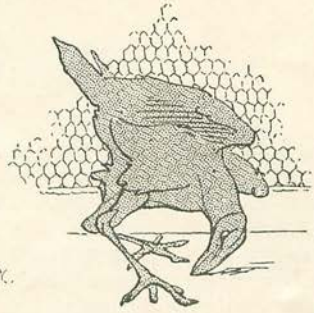
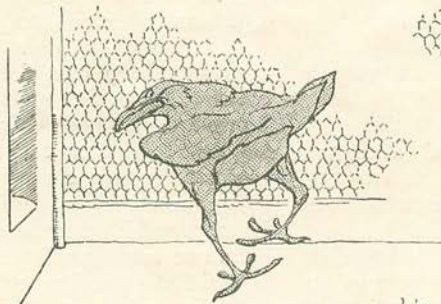
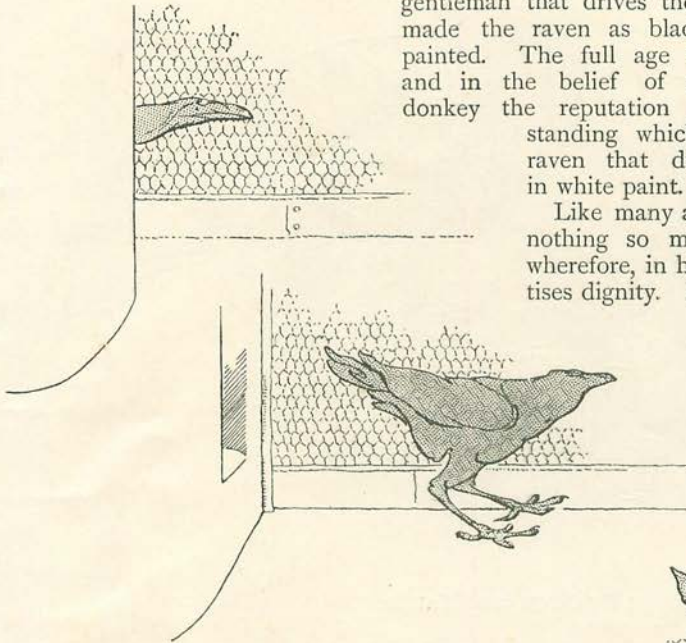
severe and business-like seriousness, that says plainly that somebody's heels must be bitten for this; preferably, I imagine, Apollo's, as the



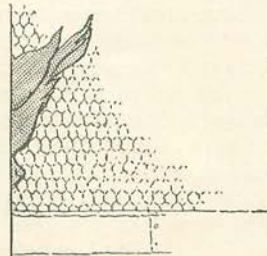
A GASP OF BUSINESS-LIKE SERIOUSNESS.

gentleman that drives the sun ; and who, also, first made the raven as black as he could possibly be painted. The full age of the raven is not known, and in the belief of many he shares with the donkey the reputation of immortality. Notwithstanding which, Charles Dickens had a raven that died of too free indulgence in white paint.

Like many another wag, the raven hates nothing so much as looking ridiculous ; wherefore, in his private moments he practises dignity. It is the last thing one would expect of the raven, but he does it. Watch the occasion and you may observe him carefully practising a graceful and



imposing emerging spring into his open cage, when he knows of nobody looking. And, in truth, the practised raven has a courtly bow, but it requires preparation and training. Betray your presence after he has substituted a downer with his nose for the stately bow and strut he had intended, and you will humiliate him as even plucking would not ; and send him into retirement with a longing to snatch your watch.



J. A. Simpson