

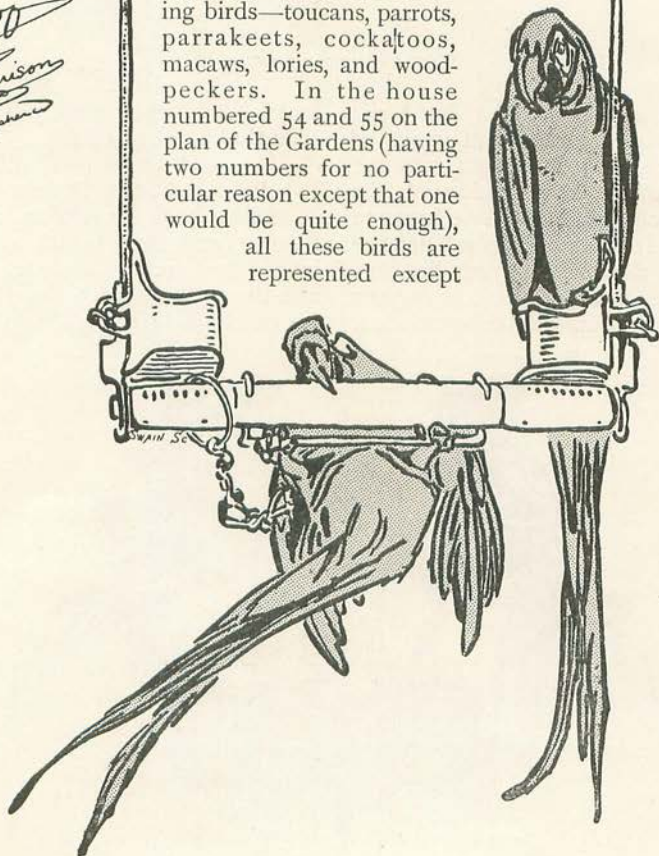


Zig Zag

Arthur Morrison
J.A. Shepley

XXI.—ZIG-ZAG SCANSORIAL.

Now, a "scansorial zig-zag" may be interpreted to mean a graded path up a cliff—does mean it, in fact, if you like to use the phrase in that sense. I don't. Scansores are climbing birds—toucans, parrots, parrakeets, cockatoos, macaws, lories, and woodpeckers. In the house numbered 54 and 55 on the plan of the Gardens (having two numbers for no particular reason except that one would be quite enough), all these birds are represented except



J.A.S.

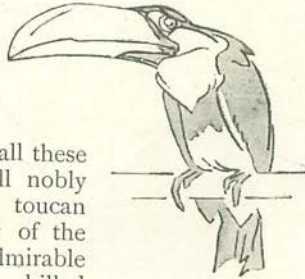
the woodpecker. The woodpecker is also excluded from this zig-zag for similar reasons, which I can't remember at this moment. One may be the fact of the woodpecker tapping, whereas all taps is vanities.

A toucan is a beak, fitted with an inadequate bird at the hinder end. It is over against the wall, opposite the front door of 54 and 55, that one recognises the fine Roman nose of the toucan. A green nose, a red nose, a yellow nose, a black nose, all these colours you may see, but all nobly Roman as to shape. The toucan will not talk in the manner of the parrot, but he (or she) is an admirable listener. I have told the green-billed toucan many stories of bird-scandal without interruption, and, on the whole, the conversation has been most improving. "Dear, dear!"—"Really, now"—"Who'd have thought it?"—"No—o—o—o! You don't really say so? Well, you do surprise me!" These are the only contributions offered to the talk by the green-billed toucan, and even these are only in pantomime. An ideal listener, the toucan. I have a horrible temptation to say that toucan play at that game, and that if you are anxious not to be toucandid, you toucan say nothing, and the bird will listen just as respectfully; but a pious bringing-up enables me to cast the temptation from me—toucancel the inclination, in fact. Howbeit, the truth remains that the toucan will listen with perfect attention whether you proffer information aloud or get no further than inventing it.

The toucan will chatter horribly in native freedom, but that is only when many hundreds of other toucans are present to keep it in countenance; for the toucan's voice is not pretty, and he knows it. Still, when hundreds assemble, every one with a discordant voice, nothing is more natural than that they should all shout at once, and unite in the belief that the performance is ad-



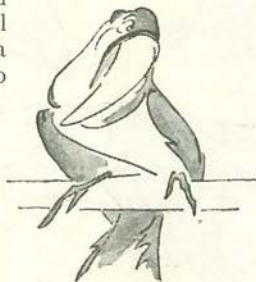
YES ?



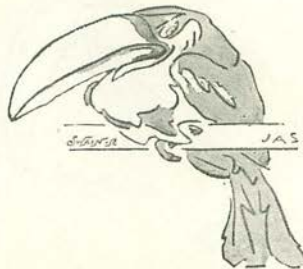
REALLY ?



DEAR, DEAR !



INDEED !



THERE NOW !

mirable. If there were any ugly women (there are not, of course—it is a mere hypothesis), and they were all collected together to the number of many hundreds on a solitary island, the first thing they would do would be to hold a beauty show with a prize for everybody, and next they would fight over the distribution of those prizes. The toucans do something very much like this—minus the fighting, because the prize is mutual admiration. They chatter and scream in their hundreds—taking care to leave a sentinel on guard, because other animals won't stand anything, even in South America—and at intervals they all join in a simultaneous yell of approbation, audible half a league off. The whole performance is a sad piece of humbug, which makes one marvel greatly that because of it the South American natives call the toucan the Preacher-bird.

Here, with so many gorgeous parrots and macaws about, the toucan behaves with becoming modesty, but in the presence of any duller-clad bird than itself its arrogance is frightful. A great crowd of toucans will mob any such unfortunate creature with much chatter, till, surrounded by long and threatening bills, like a despairing debtor, he "hops the twig"—if he can.

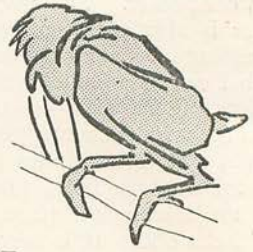
Perhaps the most dissipated-looking creature in the animal kingdom is a toucan during a bad moult. You long to give him a gallon of soda-water and a temperance tract. He sleeps much (a toucan always sleeps with his beak over his shoulder and covered by his wing—he doesn't mean to have that nose



SLEEP.



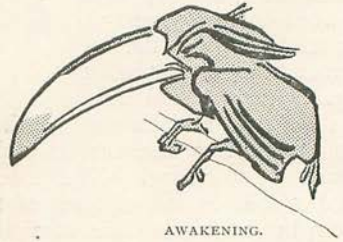
GRADUAL—



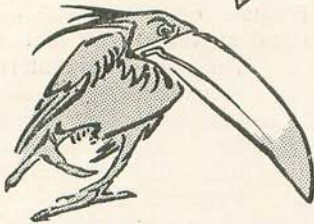
stolen)—he sleeps as much as possible, and wakes as seedy as one can imagine. He can scarcely drag his beak off his back without banging it on his perch, and con-



OH, SUCH A HEAD!



AWAKENING.

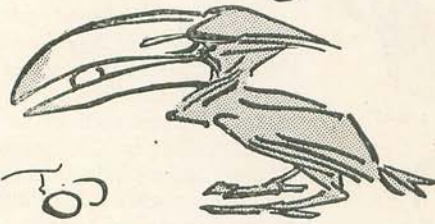


TRY BREAKFAST.



OH, I CAN'T!

siders the question of breakfast with a shudder. With many blinks he strives desperately to pull himself together—to pull together a handful of loose quills and a beak. They give him grapes; it is

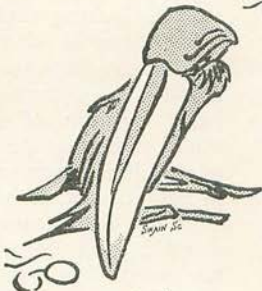


WELL, HERE GOES

a mockery. Who can eat grapes with such a head? He may struggle with a grape perhaps for a few seconds, but



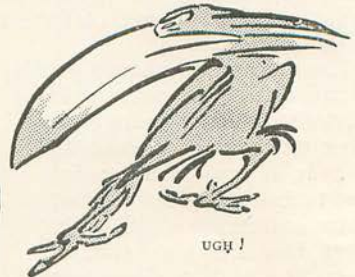
OH!



I CAN'T—



TOUCH ANOTHER.



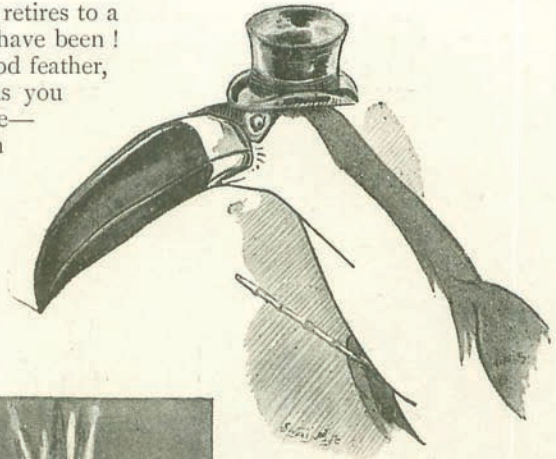
UGH!

J.A.S

breakfast beats him in the end, and he retires to a repentant corner. What a night it must have been!

Out of his moult, however, and in good feather, the toucan is rather a fine bird, so long as you forget his nose. The Ariel toucan here—with the black beak—is a little horsey in aspect—a very little—but quite neat and gentlemanly. Not such a real old crusted Tory-club-window gentleman as the Triton cockatoo, but still a gentleman. As for the green-billed toucan, she can never be anything but a good-natured Jewess in her most gorgeous Shobbos clothes.

The comparative quietness of the toucans in house number 54-55 is, probably, due to a worse thing—the noise of the parrots and cockatoos; the house can hold no more noise, and the toucans altogether despair of ever making themselves heard. Why the windows are so rarely broken I can scarcely understand, except on the hypothesis of a suspension of natural laws for the benefit of natural science and its institutions. The keeper says he doesn't mind the noise—to such torture may human nature be accommodated by long habit. Saint Cecilia would have become accustomed to boiling if she had had forty years of it. The other saint (male, but I forget which) who was grilled could never have done without his hot gridiron if he had



A LITTLE HORSEY.



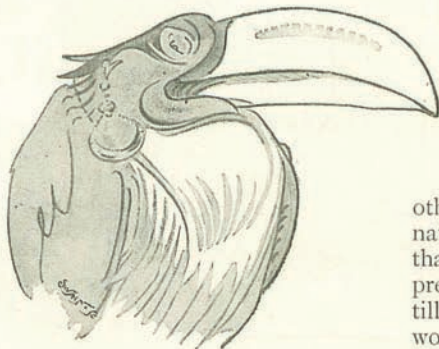
PORTRAIT OF A GENTLEMAN (CRUSTED).

been able to keep on it for forty years, the time this keeper has been among these parrots. Personally, I should expect to become reconciled to boiling, grilling, or any other class of plain cookery, in about half the time that would elapse before a few hundred competitive parrot-yells began to feel soothing to the nerves.

There is no other house in these Gardens where the unobtrusive visitor is so made to feel his utter smallness and insignificance—and that by mere brazen clamour—as in this. The elephants look large—they are large—but the elephants behave with gentlemanly quietness and self-respect.

The parrots rise up and curse you (and everything else) with sudden and painful unanimity. You are appalled, dwarfed, made insignificant and ashamed by the overpowering vastness of—the mere row.

The fact is that each single individual of this crowd of parrots, cockatoos, macaws, and parakeets holds his own importance above every other created thing as a prime article of belief, and is naturally and most virtuously indignant when he finds that you don't go directly to him and load him with presents. Therefore, he blares and screams at you, till the air swims in your ears and eyes and the outer world is but a chaos of great beaks, angry combs, and streaks of red, green, and white. If you venture so

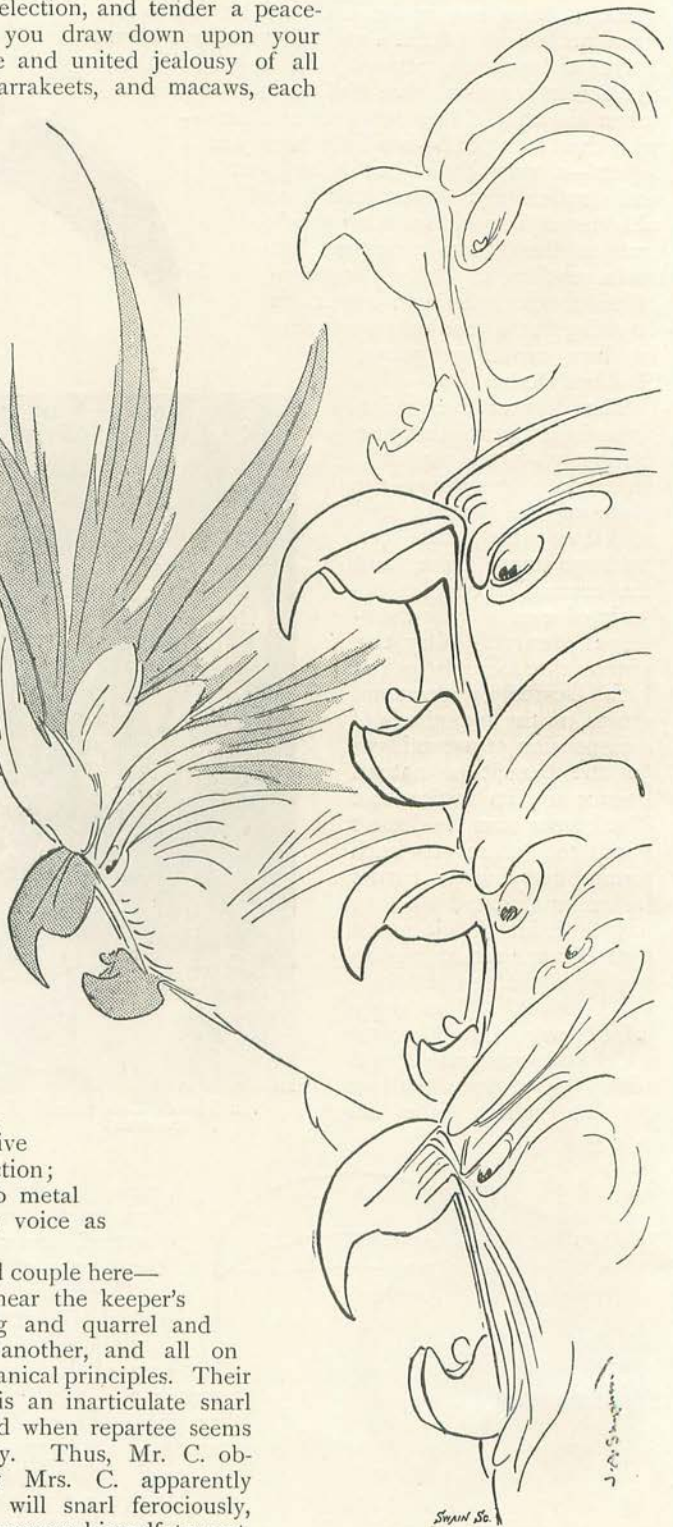


"VELL RACHAEL!"

far as to make an invidious selection, and tender a peace-offering to a particular bird, you draw down upon your devoted head the double rage and united jealousy of all the other parrots, cockatoos, parrakeets, and macaws, each convinced that you couldn't possibly have seen *him* or you would never have slighted so superlative a

creature ; and again the air and the colours swim to your senses. The whole sensation is not unlike that produced by a long inspection of immense thundering and shrieking engineering works. You feel bewildered and you feel small : and everything about you is metallic and mechanical. Every movement of a parrot, if you will but notice it, is suggestive of metal joints and mechanical action ; and the voice—but there is no metal metallic enough to emit such a voice as that at its worst.

There is a married couple here—Triton cockatoos—near the keeper's room. They nag and quarrel and snarl at one another, and all on strictly mechanical principles. Their only gibe is an inarticulate snarl delivered when repartee seems unlikely. Thus, Mr. C. observing Mrs. C. apparently asleep will snarl ferociously, and compose himself to rest.



S. WAIN

J. W. S. S. S.

In a little while Mrs. C. will rouse herself, and perceiving the placid quiescence of Mr. C., will snarl at him and go to sleep again; all this with a mechanic jerk of the head and neck suggestive of Punch or an automaton. After a while, perhaps, the inclination for a snarl will take both at once,



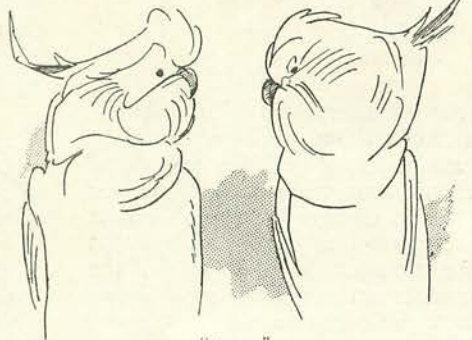
"YAP—YAP!"



"YAP!"



SULK.



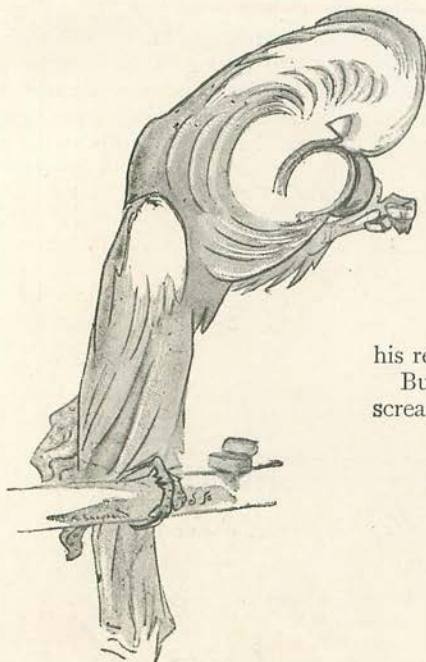
"Y —"

and, finding themselves face to face, with nothing original to say, they will subside and sulk for the rest of the day, each trying hard to think of some particularly unkind remark to hurl at the other.

Cocky, the big Triton, has been moved here from the insect-house, and shows signs of forgetting his English. That is what will occur in a congregation of this sort. The marvel is that many of the birds will still talk at all. An old, rose-crested cockatoo will dance gracefully, with his head on one side (and his eye on the reward), at the offer of a nut. He is called Cocky, in common with all of his kind, just as the parrot is always Polly; but I prefer to call him Richardson, because his is; practically speaking,



SULK.



A SNUFFER.

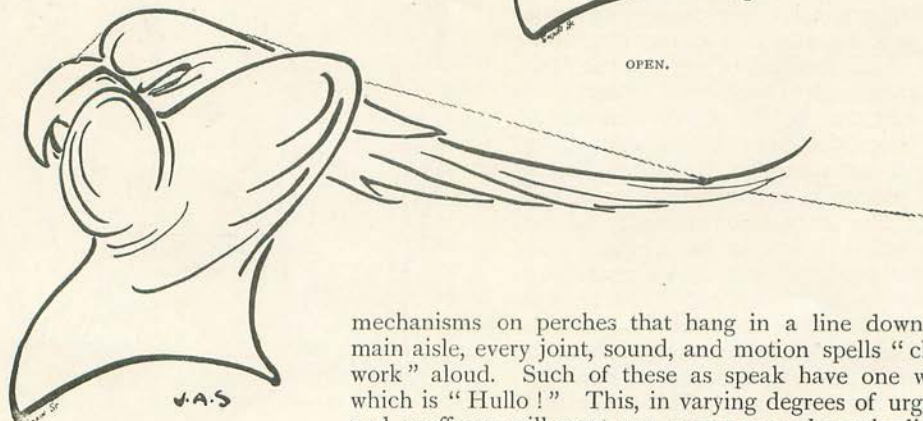
never seen a plucked parrot, but I know, without seeing, that you have only to pluck one to lay bare nuts and bolts, cams, hinges, springs, cranks, and metallic joints. See a cockatoo spread and shut his crest; clearly it is just the motion that could be actuated by a string on the wooden harlequin principle; probably, as there is no string, there is a long spiral spring under the feathers of the head (just lying along where some people part their hair) set going by a catch on the principle of the air-gun trigger. As to the gorgeous

the only show in the fair. There is a slender-billed cockatoo, who offers me a warlike challenge to "come on" whenever I approach him, and a few more who have a word or two, but Richardson is the only bird capable of a decent show. He will stand at his cage wires and bawl out "What ho! what ho! what ho!" in a way that confirms his classification as a showman and gives a hint of aspirations to tragedy. Richardson is the least mechanical of the birds here, and is a most respectable and old-fashioned veteran, who would look quite in character taking snuff, and whose polite accomplishments have not been ruined by his residence among unmannered crowds of other birds.

But, mannered or not, here is nothing but a crowd of screaming, unfeeling, snapping painted machines. I have

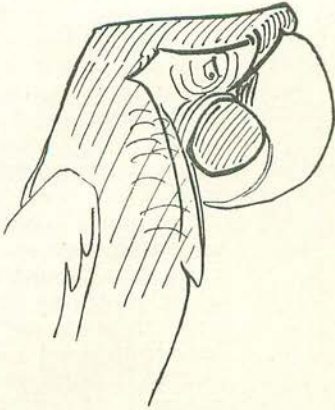


OPEN.



SHUT.

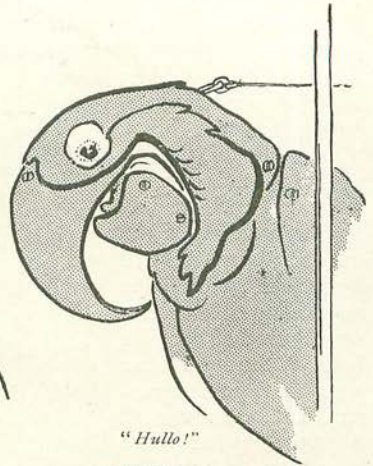
mechanisms on perches that hang in a line down the main aisle, every joint, sound, and motion spells "clock-work" aloud. Such of these as speak have one word, which is "Hullo!" This, in varying degrees of urgency and gruffness, will greet you as you pass along the line—



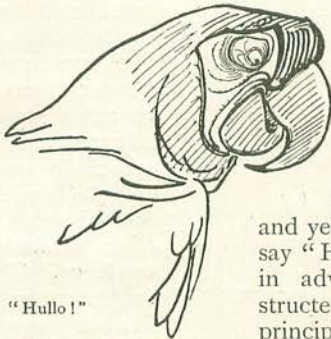
"Hullo!"



"WHAT HO!"



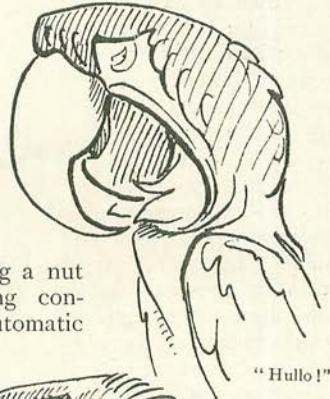
"Hullo!"



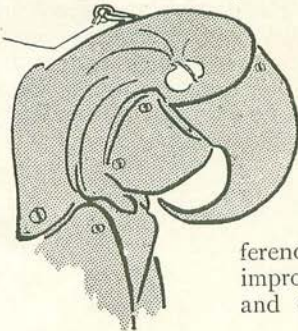
"Hullo!"

if you show any indication of nuts ; otherwise you are insignificant, and unworthy of notice.

One fine blue and yellow machine will not say "Hullo" without receiving a nut in advance ; probably being constructed on the familiar automatic principle. But it is all an expressionless outcome of clock-work.

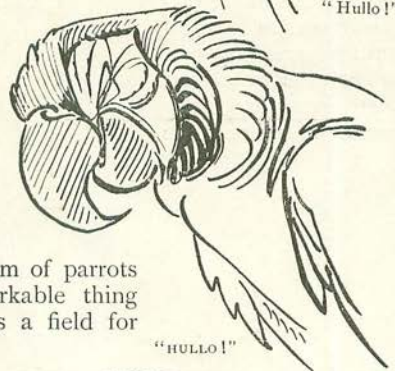


"Hullo!"



"HULLO!"

We seldom see among the lists of "patents sealed" and "provisional protections" granted, any reference to an invention for improvements in the mechanism of parrots and cockatoos. It is a remarkable thing that so obvious a field for invention and improvement should have been so much neglected. Plainly, an easy and obvious improvement would be the provision



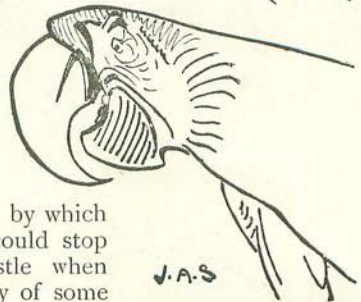
"HULLO!"



"HULLO!"

SEAN ST.

of a simple shut-off valve, by which the suffering proprietor could stop the parrot's steam whistle when desired. The desirability of some such improvement need not be



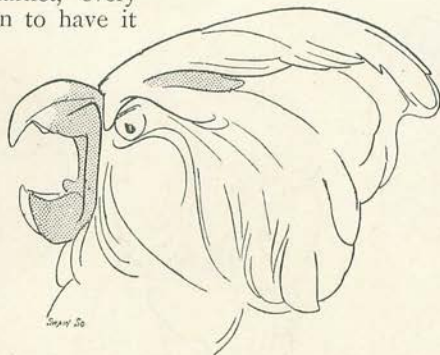
J.A.S

"HULLO!"

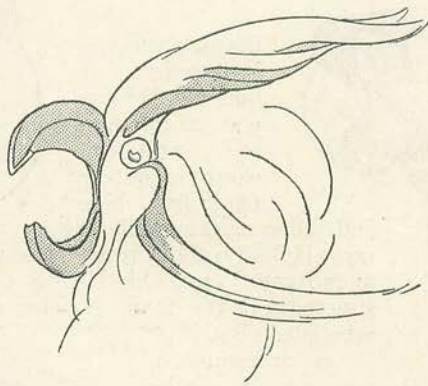
enlarged upon, and, once the appliance were in the market, every parrot-owner would hasten to have it fitted to his machine.

Another contrivance, having the same object, would consist of a self-acting escape valve, by which the familiar scream of the mechanism would be diverted, and escape noiselessly through a small grating at the back of the neck after a certain degree of pressure had been attained. Moreover, what more easy than to have the outer side of the jaw-hinge fitted with a convenient butterfly-nut, by tightening which, after the periodical stoking with maize and so forth, the engine would be prevented from nipping carelessly-offered fingers? As it is at present, the jaw-hinge is a mere ordinary pair of sharp pincers barbarically ornamented with feathers and colours.

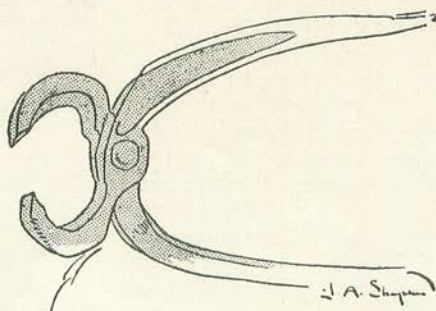
Improvements suggest themselves at every point. Many of these



A MERE



PAIR



OF PINCERS.

otherwise amusing instruments cause trouble by occasionally breaking out into startling and exceedingly forcible language. It would seem that a pressure valve might be profitably employed in this case also, by means of which, as soon as the expressions reached to the degree of "blow it," or "shut up," the power would be immediately diverted, and either allowed to escape harmlessly through a small chimney at the top of the head, or else conducted by a power-transmitting mechanism to an adjacent musical-box, which would play "Pop Goes the Weasel," or something else of a similarly moral tendency. The whole subject is full of profitable suggestions, which are offered, free of any expense beyond a small royalty to myself, to the notice of persons of mechanical genius.