THE WHITE EGRETS AND THE MILLINERY TRADE: BY T. GILBERT PEARSON, SECRETARY OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF AUDUBON SOCIETIES

At exactly twelve-thirty-two o’clock, the elaborate paneled doors of a Manhattan church swung open as if by the sudden burst of the postlude from the great organ within. A man in an upper window across the street laid down his paper and casually directed his gaze toward the decorous stream of human life that flowed outward under the gray November skies. It was Thanksgiving Day, but for some reason which he doubtless considered sufficient, he had not sought a house of devotion as did many of his worthy neighbors. Yet he was not a thoughtless person, or devoid of appreciation of those things which count for most in life; otherwise his glance would probably have rested only a moment on the figure of a stout, directoire-gowned lady, whose tightly clasped prayerbook spoke aloud her undeniable piety. It was her hat which caught his attention. A large cluster of long white airy plumes slanted backward from it, at the most approved and fashionable angle, and grandly did they wave as she shook hands with the minister who was now stationed at the doorway.

These feathers were aigrettes, purchased at a price sufficient to have given a two months’ outing to many a hard-working woman and her family. The lady was complacently proud of her plumes as she was of her sealskin coat and her Pomeranian wasp waiting at the curb in her limousine. Probably there were those present who greatly admired this magnificent feather decoration, but not so the man in the window—at least I gathered as much the next morning when he told me about it and vowed that some women of fashion cared nothing for the suffering which the gathering of their adornments entailed, if only they might appear attractive in the eyes of others as criminally thoughtless as themselves. This was perhaps too severe an indictment, for the lady probably had no knowledge of the conditions under which the feathers were originally taken. Yet it is a fact that by wearing them, she was encouraging one of the most cruel enterprises existing in the world today.

Years ago, as a boy in Florida, the writer had abundant opportunity to observe the methods employed by the agents of the New York millinery houses in collecting aigrettes, which are the nuptial plumes of the white egrets of the Southern swamp lands. As a rare treat, I was permitted to accept the invitation extended by a squirrel hunter to accompany him to the nesting haunts of a colony of these
birds. Away we went in the gray dawn of a summer morning through
the pine barrens of Southern Florida until the heavy swamps of Horse
Hammock were reached. I remember following with intense interest
the descriptions given by my companion of how these birds with magni-
ificent snowy plumage would come flying in over the dark forest high
in air and then volplane to the little pond where, in the heavily massed
bushes, their nests were thickly clustered. With vivid distinctness he
imitated the cackling notes of the old birds as they settled on their
nests and the shrill cries of the little ones, as on unsteady legs, they
reached upward for their food.

Keen indeed was the disappointment that awaited me. With
great care we approached the spot and with caution worked our way
to the very edge of the pond. For many minutes we waited but no
life was visible about the buttonwood bushes which held the nests, no
old birds like fragments of fleecy clouds came floating in over the dark
canopy of cypress trees. My companion, wise in the ways of hunters,
as well as the habits of birds, suspected something was wrong and
presently we found nearby the body of an egret lying on the ground,
its back, from which the skin bearing the fatal aigrettes had been torn,
raw and bleeding. A little farther along we came to the remains
of a second and then a third and still farther on, a fourth. As we ap-
proached, we were warned of the proximity of each ghastly spectacle
by the hideous buzzing of green flies swarming over the lifeless forms
of the poor mother birds.

At one place, beneath a small palmetto bush, we found the body
of an egret which the hunters had overlooked. Falling to the ground
soresly wounded, it escaped its enemies by crawling to this hiding
place. Its attitude spoke plainly of the suffering which it had endured.
The ground was bare, where in its death agonies it had beaten the
earth with its wings. The feathers on the head and neck were raised
and the bill was buried among the blood-clotted feathers of its breast.
On the higher ground, we discovered some straw and the embers of a
camp-fire, giving evidence of the recent presence of the plume hunters.
Examination of the nests over the pond revealed numerous young,
many of which were now past suffering, others, however, were still
alive and were faintly calling for food which the dead parents could
never bring. Later inquiry developed the fact that the plumes taken
from the backs of these parent birds were shipped to one of the large
millinery houses in New York, where in due time they were placed on
the market as “aigrettes,” and of course subsequently purchased and
worn by fashionable women, as well as by young and old women of
moderate incomes, who sacrifice much for this millinery luxury.
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THERE were at that time to be found in Florida many hundreds of colonies of these beautiful birds, but their feathers commanded a large price and offered a most tempting inducement for local hunters to shoot them. Many of the men of the region were exceedingly poor and the rich harvest which awaited them was exceedingly inviting. At that time gunners received from seventy-five cents to one dollar and a quarter for the scalp of each bird, which ordinarily contained forty or more plume feathers. These birds were not confined to Florida but in the breeding season were to be found in swampy regions of the Atlantic Coast as far north as New Jersey, some were even discovered carrying sticks for their nests on Long Island.

Civilized nations today decry any method of warfare which results in the killing of women and children, but the story of the aigrette trade deals with the slaughter of innocence by the slow process of starvation, a method which history shows has never beenfollowed by even the most savage race of men dealing with their most hated enemies. This war of extermination which was carried forward unchecked for years could mean but one thing, namely, the rapid disappearance of the egrets in the United States. As nesting birds, they have disappeared from New Jersey, Maryland and Virginia and also those States of the Mississippi Valley, where they were at one time to be found in great numbers.

One of the most potent influences which originally led to the formation of the Audubon societies was this unspeakable, barbarous war of extirpation, which is being waged against the magnificent egrets.

Within the past two decades, the Audubon Law, extending protection to these and other non-game birds, has been enacted in every State in the Union where the egret existed. This was necessarily the first step toward saving the birds. Such laws, however, were soon found to be inadequate, for in many of the Southern States no provision had been made for the establishment and maintenance of a game warden force and the ordinary local officers of the law did not feel called upon to prosecute their friends and neighbors for breaking the bird or game laws. If, therefore, the remnant of the egrets of this country were to be spared, it became evident that special agents must be employed to guard their breeding grounds, as this seemed to offer the best opportunity for accomplishing definite results.

The birds are killed only in the nesting season, for the reason that it is only in the spring and early summer that they are adorned with plumes. They are exceedingly wary at all times and difficult to approach, so in order to secure the desired product, it is the custom
of the plume hunters to visit the nesting colonies where the birds, loath to leave their young, are easily shot.

The Audubon Society early employed wardens to guard some of these places. One of the largest rookeries existing a few years ago was Cuthbert Rookery, near the south end of the mainland of Florida. A swift launch was purchased and a trustworthy agent, who was a man of integrity and undeniable courage, placed in it to protect these birds. The people of the country round about were notified that it was illegal to kill egrets and that a warden was stationed near the colony to see that the law was enforced. The killing of birds was immediately stopped and it was thought for a time that this colony might be saved. Then one day a telegram came which stated that the Warden, Guy Bradley, had been shot by plume hunters and the boat bearing his body set adrift. The financial inducements for feathers held out by Northern millinery dealers had been too strong. The warden out of the way, the colony left without a guard was utterly wiped out of existence. The Audubon workers at once raised a fund to prosecute the slayer of their agent. The only witnesses to the killing were the son of the man who had fired the fatal shot and his partner, and the trial resulted in an acquittal.

The man in the window that Thanksgiving morning knew of this and when he looked at the plumes of the lady coming out of the church, in his imagination he saw back of them the starving young birds in their nest somewhere in the Southern swamps which perished in order that she might decorate herself with their mother’s plumes. He could see, too, the bloated body of Guy Bradley floating in the Audubon patrol boat two days beneath the tropic sun, and the widow, on the lonely coral key, with her two babies left to face the world alone.

Yes, my fine lady, this is the price that has been paid for the aigrette plumes you wear, and there are today many thousands of the best people of the country who do not admire the feathers on your hat but entertain a sickening feeling of disgust that there should exist in the world people who are so shallow and foolish as unblushingly to flaunt aloft this unmistakable white badge of cruelty.

The killing of one of their agents did not stop the Audubon workers in their efforts to preserve the egrets. The sacrifice of this life, however, emphasized one point strongly and that was that there were many women in the country who would buy aigrettes as long as they were to be found on the market, and that there were men who would display these feathers in their shop windows as long as they were permitted to sell them.
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Clearly the way to meet this difficulty was to secure laws which would prohibit the sale. At a large expense and an immense amount of labor, the Society secured the passage of a law in Louisiana prohibiting the sale of feathers of native birds, which of course, included the white egrets. It was not long before a similar statute was secured in Missouri. Massachusetts quickly fell into line and similar bills were enacted in Oregon and California.

The greatest battle, however, against the marketing of these feathers has been waged in New York State. For four years in succession the Audubon Bill was introduced in the Legislature and referred to a committee for consideration and for four years these committees did not even permit the bill to come to a vote in either House of the Legislature. But the efforts of the workers who were interested in the preservation of the wild life of America at length bore fruit, for the constant agitation and the campaign of publicity at length aroused such a feeling of resentment in the State that the members of the Legislature at Albany became impressed that the Audubon Plumage Bill must be given consideration. The battles which followed in the Legislative Halls of the State Capitol will long be remembered by those whose hearts are set on preserving the birds of this country.

It was stated that fifteen millions of dollars were invested in the millinery interests of New York City alone. These interests were represented at Albany by paid attorneys and lobbyists. On one occasion a solid carload of milliners went from New York to Albany to fight this measure, but public sentiment was too strong for them. The Audubon workers had called to their aid the various Bird and Game Protective Organizations of the State, the Federation of Women’s Clubs, the Granges and hundreds of individual workers. The milliners sought to mislead the public by publishing statements to the effect that the aigrettes used in the trade were picked up on the ground about the large breeding places in South America and that the birds were not really killed for their feathers. This statement was indignantly denied by every American naturalist to whose attention the subject was drawn. Paid agents of the feather dealers even told these fairy tales to the members of the Legislative Committee having the bill in charge, but there appeared at one of these hearings a man who had for nine years been engaged in collecting aigrettes in Venezuela for the New York millinery houses, and his sworn confession presented to all the members of the Legislature was of such a character that the statements it contained could not be refuted. This man, Mr. A. H. Meyer, who lives on Staten Island, New York, stated in his affidavit:
My attention has been called to the fact that certain commercial interests in this city are circulating stories in the newspapers and elsewhere to the effect that the aigrettes used in the millinery trade come chiefly from Venezuela, where they are gathered from the ground in the large garceros, or breeding colonies, of white herons.

I wish to state that I have personally engaged in the work of collecting the plumes of these birds in Venezuela. This was my business for the years eighteen hundred and ninety-six to nineteen hundred and five, inclusive. I am thoroughly conversant with the methods employed in gathering egret and snowy heron plumes in Venezuela, and I wish to give the following statement regarding the practices employed in procuring these feathers:

The birds gather in large colonies to rear their young. They have the plumes only during the mating and nesting season. After the period when they are employed in caring for their young, it is found that the plumes are virtually of no commercial value, because of the worn and frayed condition to which they have been reduced. It is the custom in Venezuela to shoot the birds while the young are in the nests. A few feathers of the large white heron (American egret), known as the Garza blanca, can be picked up of a morning about their breeding places, but these are of small value and are known as ‘dead feathers.’ They are worth locally not over three dollars an ounce, while the feathers taken from the bird, known as ‘live feathers,’ are worth fifteen dollars an ounce.

My work led me into every part of Venezuela and Colombia where these birds are to be found, and I have never yet found or heard of any garceros that were guarded for the purpose of simply gathering the feathers from the ground. No such condition exists in Venezuela. The story is absolutely without foundation, in my opinion, and has simply been put forward for commercial purposes. The natives of the country, who do virtually all of the hunting for feathers, are not provident, and their practices are of a most cruel and brutal nature. I have seen them frequently pull the plumes from wounded birds, leaving the crippled birds to die of starvation, unable to respond to the cries of their young in the nests above. I have known these people to tie and prop up wounded egrets on the marsh where they would attract the attention of other birds flying by. These decoys they keep in this position until they die of their wounds or from the attacks of insects. I have seen the terrible red ants of that country actually eating out the eyes of these wounded, helpless birds that were tied up by the plume hunters.

To illustrate the comparatively small number of dead feathers which are collected, I will mention that in one year I and my asso-
ciates shipped to New York eighty pounds of the plumes of the large heron and twelve pounds of the little curved plumes of the snowy heron. In this whole lot there were not over five pounds of plumes that had been gathered from the ground—and these were of little value. The plume birds have been nearly exterminated in the United States and Mexico and the same condition of affairs will soon exist in tropical America. This extermination will result from leaving the young to starve in the nest when the old birds are killed, any other statement made by interested parties to the contrary notwithstanding."

On May seventh, nineteen hundred and ten, Governor Hughes signed the New York Plumage Bill after it had passed the Legislature by an overwhelming vote. This statute prohibited the sale of the feathers of any species of protected bird native to New York State, or any bird belonging to the same family of birds found in the State.

The milliners were given until July first, nineteen hundred and eleven, to dispose of the stock they had on hand. These feather merchants, however, were slow to admit their defeat. They sought, without avail, at the next session of the Legislature to have the law repealed. They appealed to the Courts for an injunction to prohibit the State officially from enforcing the law, but at every turn they have been met by an earnest force of men and women who are determined that the enactment shall be upheld and that this nefarious traffic shall never again rest as a stain on the people of New York.

Realizing that when the law should go into effect and the egret business ended in the great metropolis the milliners would probably remove their stock across the river and go merrily ahead plying their trade in New Jersey, a similar bill was introduced in that State and despite the utmost efforts of the milliners, New Jersey lined itself up with New York. But certain of the feather dealers who have grown rich at the expense of slaughtered birds are not even yet willing to give up their lucrative business, for today these plumes are actually worth twice their weight in gold. Within the past few months some of the firms whose business was destroyed by the New York law have opened stores in Philadelphia. Attractive catalogues have been issued which are being circulated widely in New York City in an endeavor to build up a mail order business from a State which still permits the sale of egret feathers.

The efforts for the preservation of these birds are now being pushed with greater vigor than ever before. During the spring of nineteen hundred and eleven, the agents of the National Association
of Audubon Societies had extended protection to twelve colonies of white egrets. These are located in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida and Louisiana. At these places there assembled last year about twenty-five hundred specimens of the large American egrets and perhaps six hundred of the small snowy egrets. The present season six additional colonies have been found and are now being protected. And this is not all—the year nineteen hundred and thirteen will see heroic efforts being made to prohibit by legislative enactment, the barbaric display of aigrettes in the shop windows of the few large cities of the United States wherein the sale is still legalized.

THE HOMESTEADEAR.

MOTHER England, I am coming, cease your calling for a season,
For the plains of wheat need reaping and the thrasher’s at the door.
All these long years I have loved you, but you cannot call it treason
If I loved my shack of shingles and my little baby more.

Now my family have departed (for the good Lord took them early)
And I turn to thee, O England, as a son that seeks his home.
Now younger folk may plough and plant the plains I love so dearly,
Whose acres stretch too wide for feet that can no longer roam.

If the western skies are bluer and the western snows are whiter,
And the flowers of the prairie-lands are bright and honey-sweet;
’Tis the scent of English primrose makes my weary heart beat lighter,
As I count the days that part me from your little cobble street.

For the last time come the reapers (you can hear the knives ring cheery
As they pitch the bearded barley in a thousand tents of gold);
For I see the cliffs of Devon bulking dark beyond the prairie,
And hear the sky-larks calling to a heart that’s growing old.

When the chaff-piles cease their burning and the frost is closing over
All the barren leagues of stubble that my lonely feet have passed,
I shall spike the door and journey towards the channel lights of Dover,
That England may receive my bones and bury them at last!

LLOYD ROBERTS.