THE MILLINERY SERPENT: BY T. GILBERT PEARSON

In the “New York Times” of September thirteenth, nineteen hundred and thirteen, one, Herbert Syrett, abuses the Audubon Society loudly and long for its effective efforts in destroying the millinery trade in feathers of wild birds. He also takes occasion to criticize the wife of President Wilson and her daughter, Miss Eleanor Wilson for their open expressions of sympathy with the Audubon cause. The real theme of his letter, however, is an effort to induce his readers to believe that the millinery feather dealers are the greatest bird lovers in the world and are anxious to increase the numbers of wild birds on the earth. This is the first time in history that such a statement has come to my attention and indicates the terrible straits in which the slaughterers of plume birds now find themselves. It is a case where the devil was sick, the devil a saint would be.

Any one who has journeyed afoot or by pack train through the desert regions of the southwestern portions of the United States is likely to have been entertained by the swift gliding movements of that feathered racehorse—the road-runner. It is quite probable, too, that he may have encountered specimens of the desert rattlesnake. There is a story which one frequently hears from the lips of the cattlemen, and to the truthfulness of which I believe some eastern travelers have attested, that the bird sometimes causes the death of the snake in the following remarkable manner. Finding the rattler dozing in a comfortable posture in the sun, the bird is reputed to gather cactus leaves and, approaching with some degree of stealth, to lay these carefully around its enemy until a complete circle is formed like a prickly row of bayonets. When the serpent rouses from its blissful lethargy its first movement is said to result in a pronounced discomfort, occasioned by the cactus spines sticking into the less armoured places of its skin. Infuriated with pain, it instantly strikes with open mouth, only to find that it has bitten off more trouble. Again and again the frantic reptile lunges madly in all directions until in the end the spot becomes a confused mass of dead snake and cactus leaves, and over it all floats the faint odor of the vainly-expended venom.

Back in the early eighties it was discovered that a big industry in the feathers of wild birds lay coiled, like a gigantic serpent, in the very midst of our national life. With its head raised high in air, it cast its glance in every direction across our country. Its eyes were of gold, and when its gaze swept along the coast of Maine, myriads of birds left their ancestral nesting island and, as if by magic, came in boxes and bales straight to the mouth of the huge reptile, whose
THE MILLINERY SERPENT

head rested among the storied buildings of lower New York. But this
was no ordinary serpent. A few hundred thousand birds shot down
in the prime of life did not satisfy its appetite, and the dirge of the
helpless young dying on the pebbly beaches, wafted on every gale
that blew from the north, meant nothing to its dull and senseless
ears. Gloatingly it turned toward the south, and wherever men
cought a glimpse of those golden, gleaming eyes they rushed forth to
torture and to kill until, mingled with the sand of our beaches, there
lay rotting the bones of one of our choicest heritages—the wild bird
life of the open seas.

IN the swamps of Florida word was carried that the great New
York millinery trade was bidding high for the feathers of those
plume birds which gave life and beauty to even its wildest
regions. It was not long before the cypress fastnesses were echoing
to the roar of breech-loaders, and cries of agony and piles of torn
feathers became common sounds and sights even in the remotest
depths of the Everglades. What mattered it if the tropical birds of
exquisite plumage were swept from existence and the feet of the
outcast white man, the negro and the Seminole slipped in the blood
of slaughtered innocence, if only the millinery trade might prosper—
if only the serpent might gather more fat on its sides!

But the trade was not content to collect its prey only in obscure
and little-known regions, for a chance was seen to commercialize
the small birds of the forests and fields. The warblers, the thrushes,
the wrens, all those little forms of dainty bird life which come about
the home to cheer the hearts of men and women and gladden the eyes
of little children, commanded a price if done to death and their
pitiful corpses shipped to New York.

One might go farther and give the sickening details of how the
birds were swept from the mud flats about the mouth of the Missis-
sippi and the innumerable shell lumps of the Chandeleurs. How the
Great Lakes were bereft of their feathered life, and the swamps of
Kankakee were all but rendered silent. How the white pelicans, the
grebes and the wild water-fowl of the West were butchered and their
skinned bodies left in pyramids to fester in the sun. One might re-
count stories of bluebirds and robins shot on the very lawns of peaceful
citizens of our eastern States in order that the feathers might be
spirited away to glut the never-satisfied appetite of the milliner.

Taxidermists, who made a business of securing birds and prepar-
ing their skins, found abundant opportunity to ply their trade. Never
had the business of taxidermy been so profitable as in those days.
For example, in the spring of eighteen hundred and eighty-two,
some of these agents of the feather trade established themselves somewhere along the New Jersey coast, and sent out word to natives of the region that they would buy the bodies of freshly-killed birds of all kinds which might be procurable. The various species of terns, which were then abundant on the Jersey coast, offered the best opportunity for profit, for not only were the birds found in vast flocks, but they were comparatively easy to shoot. Ten cents a piece was the price paid, and so lucrative a business did the shooting of these birds immediately become that many of the baymen gave up sailing pleasure parties and became gunners. These men often received as much as fifty or a hundred dollars a week for their skill and prowess with the shotgun.

It was not surprising that at the end of the season a local observer reported: "One cannot help noticing now the scarcity of terns on the New Jersey coast, and it is all owing to the merciless destruction." Never have birds been worn in this country in such numbers as in those days. Ten or fifteen small song birds were often seen sewed on a single hat.

In eighteen hundred and eighty-six, Dr. Frank M. Chapman, the ornithologist, strolled down to the shopping district of New York City on his way home from his office late two afternoons in succession, and carefully observed the feather decorations on the hats of the women whom he chanced to meet. The results of his observation, as reported in "Forest and Stream," show that he found in common use as millinery trimming such highly-esteemed birds as robins, thrushes, bluebirds, tanagers, swallows, warblers and waxwings. He discovered also bobolinks, larks, orioles, doves and woodpeckers. In short, he positively recognized the plumage of no less than forty species of our best known American birds. In commenting on his trip of inspection, Dr. Chapman wrote: "It is evident, that, in proportion to the number of hats seen, the list of birds given is very small; for in most cases mutilation rendered identification impossible. Thus, while one afternoon seven hundred hats were counted, and on them but twenty birds recognized, five hundred and forty-two were decorated with feathers of some kind. Of the one hundred and fifty-eight remaining, seventy-two were worn by young or middle-aged ladies, and eighty-six by ladies in mourning or elderly ladies."

This was in a period when people seemed to go mad on the subject of wearing birds and bird feathers. They were used for feminine adornment in almost every conceivable fashion. Here are two actual quotations from New York daily papers of that period, only the names of the ladies are changed: "Miss Jones looked extremely well in white
with a whole nest of sparkling, scintillating birds in her hair which it would have puzzled an ornithologist to classify,” and again, “Mrs. Robert Smith had her gown of unrelieved black looped up with blackbirds; and a winged creature so dusky that it could have been intended for nothing but a crow, reposed among the curls and braids of her hair.”

Ah, those were the halcyon days for the feather trade! Now and then a voice cried out at the slaughter, or hands were raised at the sight of the horrible shambles, but there were no laws to prevent the killing nor was there any crystalized public sentiment to demand a stopping of the unspeakable orgy, while on the other hand riches yet lay in store for the hunter and the merchant. Against such fearful odds, where was the man who dared assail this legalized traffic in the feathers of slaughtered birds? Where was the adventurous Jason who should slay the dragon?

In February, eighteen hundred and eighty-six, the Audubon Society was organized for the avowed purpose of fighting the feather trade, and never, for one moment from that day to this, have the bird lovers of the country ceased to regard the dealers in bird feathers as the greatest enemy to wild bird life. The Audubon Society has fought this trade in every nook and corner of the country and, though always meeting with the stoutest resistance, has never for an instant yielded a concession. In the words of Kipling, their motto may be said to have been, “Cry no truce with jackal men.”

At first the Audubon Society did little but publish literature calling the attention of the public to the appalling destruction that was going on about us. The wholesale milliners glanced at these circulars, shrugged their shoulders and smiled deprecatingly.

Slowly the public began to take an interest in this propaganda, but the wholesale feather dealers went smilingly on with their work of sending out thousands of circulars to the four corners of the country, inviting all men to kill birds and thereby reap their share of the golden harvest. But the bird lovers were increasing in numbers, and their influence in legislative halls began to be noticed. One State after another, at the earnest solicitation of the Audubon workers, began to pass laws against the killing of native birds, and tens of thousands of women were signing the Audubon pledges that they would wear no more feathers, and especially would they decry the use of the plumes known as “aigrettes.”

Then things began to wear a serious aspect in the minds of the feather merchants. No humane appeal could reach this class of men, but the fact that their business was beginning to suffer was a
THE MILLINERY SERPENT

subject for serious consideration; so they put their heads together and the word was soon passed that an announcement would shortly be made to the reading public which would refute the statements of the bird lovers who claimed that "aigrettes" were taken only from parent birds while the helpless young were left in the nest to starve.

The cactus needles of the Audubon Society had begun to prick and the serpent was coiling to strike. It lunged in the form of a statement that egret plumes were not taken from slaughtered birds but were picked up from the ground in the "domestic egret farms" of far off Tripoli. This was a mistaken stroke, for the absolute falsity of the statement was quickly proven and the triumph of the Audubon workers sang louder than ever before. State after State now quickly followed the example of their pioneer sisters, and the "Audubon Law," which made it illegal to kill non-game birds, was before long printed in the statute books of nearly every State in the Union.

Then came the latter-day efforts to stop absolutely the sale of the feathers of native wild birds, and how the wholesale milliners have fought these efforts! In the committee rooms in the Capitol at Albany, I have faced in debate forty of these men at a time, who, with the shrewdest lawyers that money could hire, had journeyed thither to stem if possible the rising tide of public indignation which now demanded the stamping out of this nefarious traffic. At one of these hearings they maintained that if the bill then pending should become a law, twenty thousand poor women would be thrown out of employment in New York City alone. Yet a few weeks ago, when I faced these same people again in conference and put the question to them "How many employees did the New York Anti-feather Law actually throw out of employment?" they reluctantly admitted "Not over twelve."

THERE has been much disturbance in the cactus thicket of late, for the hideous giant reptile that has fattened upon the life blood of myriads of mother birds, has been thrashing madly about in its frantic efforts to combat the stinging, smothering effect of a tremendously grown public sentiment. In nearly all the large centers of population the feathers of birds for millinery purposes have been made contraband, and now Congress has passed a law absolutely prohibiting the importation of the feathers of wild birds into this country except for scientific purposes. The effect of this will be to save the lives of untold numbers of birds in the uttermost parts of the earth, for the whole world has of late been raked, as with a fine toothed comb, to collect materials for hat decoration. Milliners
THE MILLINERY SERPENT

admit that this blow will so injure their trade in feathers that it will not pay to handle the few they can now get in the United States, and styles will accordingly be changed.

In regard to the long and bitter fight in Washington, the following quotations from an editorial appearing in a July issue of the Warheit (Jewish Truth), a paper read by virtually all the large feather importers and wholesale feather merchants, will throw an interesting sidelight on the struggle:

"The war that is being waged now to save the birds of the nation is not a local issue, but a national one.

"There are two groups of men struggling now at Washington before Congress. One group is the old organization of importers and traders of feathers and plumes, who have made millions from the destruction and the slaughter of the birds of the country, which were our pride, our joy, our blessing.

"This group of men who want to exterminate the birds of the woods and of the fields and of the sea and of the mountains, have no arguments, no reason, no right, no justification, no conscience, except the arguments, the right, the reason, and the conscience of their pockets. And with money, they purchase the souls of lawyers and politicians to help them to crush the people in its wishes and will.

"And there is another group of men, scientists, explorers, naturalists, humanitarians, and patriots who are struggling for a law to protect the birds, to save the life upon wings.

"The first group which is struggling against the birds, against nature, against humanity, against the people, are a few Jewish tradesmen and their hired Jewish lawyers.

"The other group who form a voluntary avant-guard of the people, have no personal interest or designs or motives. They are struggling only for the higher ideals of humanity.

"And we, from the Warheit, as citizens of America and children of the Jewish race, again declare and protest that the Jewish people is heart and soul in this struggle, not with the Jewish tradesmen and importers, but against them, and with the men and for the men who are struggling to preserve and perpetuate the birds of the woods everywhere and forever.

"As Jews, we do not want that Jews should fight as a lobby for the selfish interest of the few against the interest of all, the wishes of all and the best aspirations of all."

The long struggle to end the bird feather trade in the United States is rapidly drawing to a close. The bird protectors have always gathered strength from the very beginning of this struggle and the milliners have always lost their fights. And now at last deserted even
by the great influential Jewish organ, the Warheit, they have little
to hope for.

Here and there sympathetic adherents still cry out occasionally.
As for example, the writer in the Times whose most truthful
statement by the way runs in this wise: "At this time it would seem
the (feather) trade as a whole has not a single friend or sympathizer
among press or public." Such faint outcries as his are but indica-
tions of the last squirming movements of the dying reptile. The
surreptitious killing of birds for their feathers will continue in places,
and occasionally milliners will take a chance on selling plumage
contrary to law, but the big, open, wholesale, shameless traffic can
no longer continue. Soon the raven and the coyote will find rare
pickings in the cactus thicket.

THE BLUE GENTIAN

(See Cover)

THE sky kissed the earth in consolation; for its flowers were
faded, their reds, yellows, purples and pinks overridden by
the grim drear of brown. The sweet, soughing plaint of the
wind was long since spent: its will now was determined and it played
roughly among things dead. The crust of the earth, no longer
mellow, was dry and finely crumbled to dust. It covered the coat of
the stranger, who traveled the highway, causing him to blink his
eyes.

For these and for other reasons perhaps the sky kissed the earth
in consolation.

As the traveler lifted his eyes his footsteps halted. Beside him
the tangled grass of the bank was pale, even colorless, yet stirring
through it was the magic of a slight flutter and a glint of color more
blue than that of the bluebird’s wing. It was the spot where grew
the blue gentian.

No other flower bore it company. Alone it had crossed the
borderland of frost and for the traveler it changed the sad look of his
surroundings into those regal and appealingly sweet. He sat down
to rest and his heart beat with joy, his pulses quickened and his brain
grew clear through the nearness of the flower that had held the blue
of the sky when the earth was kissed in consolation.