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1897

Fashion's photo cabinet.

Mercer, H. C.

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*"And I had done a hellish thing,
And it would work 'em woe,
For all averred, I had killed the bird,
That made the breeze to blow."*

H.

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FASHION'S HOLOCAUST.

BY HENRY C. MERCER,

*Curator of the Department of American and Prehistoric Archaeology, at
the University of Pennsylvania.*

PUBLISHED FOR THE AUDUBON SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA.

What New Woman, what patroness of Civic Club or New Century Drawing-room, will care to hear reiterated the pitiful truth pertaining to the egret (white heron) plumes that she has worn, and continues to wear in spite of all protest.

Ten years ago, to the glory of "Assemblies" and "Patriarchs," one Lechevallier (see Mr. W. E. D. Scott in *The Auk* for April, 1887) built a cabin at the Great Maximo heron nesting-place in West Florida, where the sky had been dark with winged clouds whose beauty Virgil sung and the Japanese artist delights to paint, and in four nesting seasons slaughtered or drove off all. With repeating rifles and guns chosen for the work, he killed one by one ethereal parents, whose instinct brought them hovering back to the trees where their young cried from the nests, and their mates in wedding plumes lay bleeding. He tore the white feathers from their backs, heads, and breasts, and threw the bleeding carcasses in heaps to the blow-flies. Vultures hovered over the nestlings as their voices grew weak, until they turned black in the sun, or their struggling forms fell from the tree-tops to confront his steps in the mud. For weeks and months his guns cracked, until the work for fair women ceased to "pay." Having outdone the blood-letting mink and shamed the voracious wolverine, having destroyed countless egrets, ibises, spoonbills, and herons, who, for love of starved nestlings and abandoned eggs had perished in their honeymoon, he moved his cabin, and tried Pappys Bayou, Rocky Creek, or Big Sarasota.

Who has followed the steps of Lechevallier? We only catch occasional glimpses, in the pages of Mr. Scott, of a malevolent figure ranging the southern swamps, that reminds us of the child kidnappers of Gilles de Retz, the French "Bluebeard." We only know (as eye-witness Frank Johnson told Mr. Scott) how again for our sisters and cousins, Lechevallier happened to be seen slaughtering as he went along, as a mere trifle, 80 to 100 brown pelicans that nested on a little island near Johnson's house, and then, as always, leaving the young to perish in the nests. Thus one massacre out of hundreds gets upon record, that might do for a court of law.

Fair one, full of influence over men, children, and fashion, throw this into the fire for the sake of your egrets, before you read that Johnson told Mr. Scott how Batty, a New York plume man, with headquarters near Fort Myers, West Florida, helped by from 40 to 60 men, ravaged the whole west coast of Florida for you; bought up all the spoonbills, egrets, ibises, and herons that his men could kill from the nests; all the breeding Wilson's plovers, all the sandpipers, least terns, boat-tailed blackbirds, gray kingbirds, owls, and hawks that his boatmen could land and shoot, in season or out of season, at from 10 cents to \$1 a carcass, and from 20 cents to \$2.50 a skin.

Egrets (back feathers),	40 cts.
Snowy heron (back, breast, and head),	55 cts.
<i>Ardea rufa</i> (back),	40 cts.
<i>Ardea ruficollis tricolor</i> (back),	10 cts. to 15 cts.
Ward's heron (head and back),	75 cts.
Roseate spoonbill (whole skin),	\$2.00 to \$2.50

All this and much more is related by the ornithologist, Mr. W. E. D. Scott, in *The Auk* for April, July, and October, 1887. Are the details and authority exact enough? Are our sisters and cousins consoled with the information of the woman who, I hear, wrote to the *London Times* last summer (from India) that their egret feathers were *moulted* feathers? Do they want to appoint a committee of the Acorn Club or the Colonial Dames to consider the fact that a man named Wilkerson told Mr. Scott that he shot, with a 22-caliber Winchester, making little noise, 400 *nesting* plume-birds in four days? Dare they follow the foot-

steps of their agents and hear the starvelings cry as they tumble from the nests and turn black in the sun? Dare they watch the vultures as they soar for miles over the putrid nests? Not, it seems, until their plume hunters have brought the crow and the vulture, the raccoon and the blow-fly, upon *all* fair heron-life at its honeymoon will they be satisfied. In the West their longing for feathers will not desert them, as it did not in Florida, where, by 1886, they had exiled the immense clouds of helpless birds, or exterminated them, eggs, young, and all, that perished at the great nesting-grounds of Papys Bayou, Double Branches, Rocky Creek, Bullfrog River, Casey's Pass, Kettle Harbor, Charlotte Harbor, Big Sarasota, Maximo, and Matchla Pass. Now the work seems done in the land of flowers. Their Lechevalliers and Wilkersons have gone West to fill woman's orders there, where the Ornithologists' Union is now helplessly trying to urge the Mexican Governor of Lower California to stop the slayers, as it seems nothing can stop their patronesses.

We can see by Mr. W. E. D. Scott's account (in *The Auk*, April, July, and October, 1897) that the women of Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, or Washington, our sisters, cousins, friends, paid Batty to hire Lechevallier and others to do a hundred times more than this in Florida ten years ago, and we can be sure that where the birds exist they are doing it still. How many women heard the story of the egrets in 1889 from American and English newspapers, from the ornithologists, from Humane and Audubon Societies? It has been brought to their attention by leaflets and dinned into their ears by friends. Browing assailed the cruel vanity. Champions of humanity have proclaimed the shame on both sides of the water, until four years ago Mr. W. H. Hudson, the English naturalist, in a protest (*London Times*, October 17, 1893), well-nigh gave up in despair. They listen as the daughter of Pere Goriot listened, who tried on a dress while her father died. Let no poet wonder at the fair whiteness of a heron again. Let the watery woods grow wearisome. In vain the coaxings, the appeals, the inducements; in vain the description of wedding victims. Let the nestlings scream. Lechevallier or no Lechevallier, humanity or no humanity, egret plumes they will have, more and more and more,

though the vultures should refrain and leave the whole South Californian swamp to putrify with the decaying flesh of snowy victims.

When the hairdresser is done, while the carriage waits, before your last look in the mirror, read if you can another description by T. Gilbert Pearson (World's Congress of Ornithology, Chicago, Charles H. Sergel Co., Chicago, 1896) of the starveling cries dedicated to you at an inland rookery near Waldo, Florida, where the flies buzzed over heaps of mangled and beautiful bodies, each with back stripped raw. Read how the plumes of one parent hidden under a tuft of grass had failed to find their roundabout way to the "dinner dance." "The ground was still wet with its blood. The earth had been beaten smooth with its wings. Its neck was arched. The plumes on its head were raised, and its bill was buried in the blood-clotted feathers of its breast." Though it was dead, its young were alive. Too weak to rise they uttered the piteous cries, so often described, as they lifted their heads for the food, which because of the vanity of human mothers their dead mothers could never bring.

"There is nothing in the whole earth," says Mr. W. H. Hudson (in the *London Times* for October 17, 1893) "so pitiable as this. So pitiable and shameful, that for such a purpose human cunning should take advantage of that feeling and instinct which we regard as so noble in our own species, and as something so sacred, the tender passion of a parent for its offspring, which causes it to neglect its own safety and perish miserably a sacrifice to its love."

But who does not know that the sickening work is not confined to herons?

While ten years ago Mr. Scott was seeing these things in Florida, a New York woman (see *Science*, February 26, 1886) hired men in one season to kill, at ten cents each about forty thousand gulls and terns, on the Cobb's Island roost in the Chesapeake Bay. These were sold in Paris (where, according to Guizot, all civilizing ideas must first be tested by a superior intelligence before their application to Christendom) at forty cents each. Are you capable of teaching a child not to be cruel if you will not discard your "murderous millinery," when you know that (as explained in *Science*,

February 26, 1886) thousands of skins of the soft-feathered and easily-dyed grebes, rare in the East, come to you in vales from deserted nesting-grounds in the West? That, according to the editor of *Forest and Stream* (March 6, 1884), a bird man who handles 30,000 skins per annum killed and prepared for you 11,018 children of the air in three months of 1883 in eastern South Carolina? Who cares whether these birds, or those of the 70,000 skins shipped to a New York dealer about the same time, were songsters or not? Who cares whether they were shot in season or out of season, provided their bodies or feathers are "pretty?" What effect has been produced by the knowledge that Isaac McClellan, of Greenport, Long Island, in 1886, told Mr. William Dutcher (*Science*, February 26, 1886) that our sisters' agents, the hat decorators, had nearly exterminated the gulls in that region, slaughtering, besides, robins, orioles, blackbirds, meadow-larks, etc.? And who regrets the thousand cedar birds which one gunner told Mr. Dutcher he shot for women's hats in the winter of 1883? or the fact that the pleasure boatmen at Barnegat and Beach Haven, New Jersey, stopped boating to earn \$50 a week killing terns for women at 10 cents a piece, together with crow blackbirds, red-winged blackbirds, and snow-buntings, so as to make it possible for Mr. Dutcher to find 30,000 skins of these birds for sale in a New York hat store in 1883?

But why care for the 40,000 terns (see J. A. Allen, in *Science*, February 26, 1886) slaughtered in a single recent season on Cape Cod? Who that is deaf to the egret's story will listen to that of the robin, the meadow lark, the sparrow, the thrush, the warbler, the vireo, or the wax-wing? With the fate of the 20,000,000 to 30,000,000 birds (W. H. Hudson, in *London Times*, October 17, 1893) annually imported to Great Britain from across the seas "feathered woman" seems to have no concern. The unfortunate egret comes from India, and, if no more from Florida, from South America, from the far Orient, and from Australia. The birds of paradise, whose stuffed carcasses might curse their wearers, are nearly exterminated in Borneo. The parakeets are poisoned in New Guinea. From the ends of the earth, here a wing and there a tail, here a head and there a breast, incongruous nondescripts are patched together from a multitude of fair

corpses, rifled by "civilized" men and natives from anti-podal nests. What if their death speaks of a dreariness that creeps over the world as of "a garden without flowers, childhood without laughter, an orchard without blossoms, a sky without color, or roses without perfume. Fashion has once more proved (as says the *London Times*, October 17, 1893) that in its influence on the human mind it is more than a match for humanity." A shameful fact, truer now than it was in 1886, when you find (see *Science*, February 26, 1886) among 13 women in a Madison Avenue, New York, street-car, 11 hatted as follows: "1. Heads and wings of 3 European starlings. 2. Entire bird of foreign unknown species. 3. Several warblers, representing 4 species. 4. A large tern. 5. The heads and wings of 3 shore larks. 6. The wings of 7 shore larks and grass finches. 7. Half a gallinule. 8. A small tern. 9. A turtle dove. 10. A vireo and yellow-breasted chat. 11. Ostrich plumes."

How, when, and where these unfortunates met their death, who can tell? though we may guess that the 100,000 rails and bobolinks slaughtered in a month near Philadelphia, or the hundreds of robins, thrushes, wax-wings, sparrows, meadow-larks, vireos, blackbirds, and warblers marketed in March, 1885 (*Science*, February 26, 1896), at Norfolk, Virginia, for food were not killed nesting.

Forever winning the love of man, "How many women in ten thousand" asks Ouida (*Nineteenth Century*, August, 1896) "use this unlimited power which they possess to breathe the quality of mercy into the souls of those who are for a time as wax in their hands?" If, as they may argue, or as a Spaniard told me, the American pigeon shooting, or the European battue game slaughter, protected by legislators, who according to their lights would eat skylark pie and vote down prize-fights, or the stabbed pig, or the fox torn by the pack, are things as cruel as bull-fights; if, as woman might urge, American buffalo extinction, the desire to slay that possesses the big-game-hunting Anglo-American; if the corpse-making of elephants (40,000 a year in Africa,—see *Cosmos*, January, 1897) or Boone and Crockett Club glory in the death of the Rocky Mountain goat and vanishing species, are things equally pitiless, how can she extinguish the slaughter lust

in man if she smiles and changes the subject when told (*The Auk*, January, 1897) that Indians are now hired to make bleeding heaps of heron carcasses for her at the mouth of Magdalena River, California, and that she and the shop dealers and plume men fit out sea boats to make the lagoons echo with starving bird cries on the sea-coast of California and Mexico.

This is no worse than the rifling by Texans (as seen by Mr. G. B. Sennett, *Science*, February 26, 1886) of all the pelican nests on an island in Corpus Christi Bay, to boil down the callow young for pelican oil, nor the fact that no pass, harbor, or bay settlement on the Texan coast fails to mercilessly egg the neighboring sea-birds' nesting-grounds each spring, smashing innumerable eggs half hatched or fresh, at any given breeding place at the start, to insure fresh and saleable plunder.

But is the Paris-set hat fashion of the "feathered woman," which, according to Mr. Hudson (*London Times*, October 17, 1893), began in 1868 to 1870, any better? Has the holocaust which he almost despaired of checking in 1893, abated since? Walk down Chestnut Street in 1897 with your eyes open and answer. The charm and joy of summer woods, the exquisite poetry of nature, its winged music, is sacrificed everywhere. Count the herons if you can. A hermit thrush fixed on a hat at Allen's; 9 warblers (wings, legs, and heads) counted by Mrs. Robins on one woman's hat; 2 canary birds seen by her on the cap of a baby; salad birds in a window on South Street; red starts, barn swallows, terns, scarlet tanagers, bluebirds on all sides. The despicable shame of destroying humming-birds, delightful as the elves in "Midsummer Night's Dream" fixed upon every store. Ten of their tails in one woman's hat. Duller hued female birds dyed so that you cannot recognize them. And above all the shimmering gossamer films of the egret mother proclaiming the persistent triumph of cruel vanity. Then go to church, and hear through the same plumes the sound of the minister's unrepining words, charged with little more consideration of the subject than a roundabout inference from Balaam's story, "The Fallen Sparrow," or the notion, vouchsafed me by a Washington minister in Spain (who approved of bull-fights, horse disemboweling and all), that the "animals were given us to kill."

“Honor and admiration for the few women,” says Mr. S. D. Keach (in the *Country Gentleman* for June 2, 1896) “who will not wear bird corpses in their head-gear.” But they are few. “The old cannibal,” says Mr. Hudson, “had no soul growths to boast of, and did not sin against the light;” as it appears one of the first ladies of England did, when the editor of the *London Chronicle* (July, 1896) had to beg her not to wear an egret-trimmed dress at her wedding.

Are we to suppose, after all, that many of those whom we must go on counting as our friends, who pay the shopmen to pay the Lechevalliers, Wilkersons, and Johnsons to do this work, do not yet, in spite of many appeals, know the facts? How many have answered the egret’s story thus (a young lady with a Sunday-school class interested in charity): “I have my hands full, and cannot subtract energy from other causes for the Audubon Society. Besides, it is no worse than sport.” (A handsome and fashionable friend): “I can’t flatter myself that I have any influence. The thing should be attacked in Paris.” (A merchant who will not sell playing cards): “I will refer the matter to the head of my millinery department,”—in spite of which he has gone on selling egrets for two months. (The wife of a minister who disapproves of the fashion): “I am half a convert, but intend to wear out my egret feathers, as I can’t afford to throw away my best hat trimmings.” It is our nearest relatives, our closest friends who say, “When the bird is once dead I might as well wear the feathers as any one else;” or, “What can the poor little Audubon Society do against the cloud of feathers you see in New York?” or, “I can imagine joining the Audubon Society—*i. e.*, stopping wild bird feathers for decoration while keeping on with game and other birds—to please an importunate friend, but not for any interest I take in the cause;” or, “I am not among those who place animals or birds before men,” and “Don’t look at this,” holding a hand over the egret, “it’s an old one,—I had it before I said I would stop.”

Better turn to him, who, telling us that it were foolish inconsistency to help only the birds without regard for the dire cry of animal pain that yearly rends the sky, assures us that the circulation of man’s blood

is and must be established on the death throes of innumerable living creatures. As we seem to search in vain for pity among the masses of human rulers of the world, so he asks us to look no less hopelessly for it among the animals themselves; to wrestle with the truth that the hawk devours the dove, the dove the insect, and the insect the plant; that the blood-letting mink kills more than he can eat; that household cats rend nestling birds, and red squirrels destroy nests, birds, and eggs as if for malicious fun. Confronted with a problem almost too painful to approach, let the searcher admit that he hesitates, not knowing where to turn or how far to go. But he finds no safe consolation in the thought that he is no more cruel than the brutes to whom he would show mercy.

Ahead of all his fellow-creatures in the bloody struggle, where it has been said the fittest only survive, how long shall man hold fast to the grosser habits of the conflict? At an immense advantage over the weaker children of earth and air, he turns upon them as cows turn upon a wounded cow, as wolves devour a sick wolf, as birds peck a wounded bird to death. He invents new apparatus, irresistible engines for sport, vanity, experiment, and amusement, until as a civilized Christian at the end of the nineteenth century he makes more blood and pain than as an ape he ever dreamed of. These are but idly framed sentences, to those who only think. But to those who feel, they are torture. What and where is pity for those who cannot plead their cause, whom we protect by laws generally to eat, or in order to witness their death struggles for sport; and who, in "our unceasing spite," as Ouida says (*Nineteenth Century*, August, 1896), "find an enemy more cruel than any with which man has to contend?"

"What sense of kinship," continues the writer, "have we with the winged children of the air, with the four-footed dwellers beside us on the earth? Almost the only recognition we give them is maltreatment. At other times the indifference of our unspeakable fatuity rises in a dust cloud between us and them. Of gratitude for their companionship, their aid, their patience, their many virtues, there is not a trace in those who use them and abuse them, no more than

there is gratitude for the beauty of the rose or the fragrance of the violet.

“As ‘the winds of March take the world with beauty,’ and every pasture and coppice is full of blossom, which we too often tread under foot or pass unnoticed in every daily country walk, so in the same manner do the multitudes trample down and pass by the ineffable charm and fragrance of disregarded affections and unappreciated qualities in the other races of earth.”

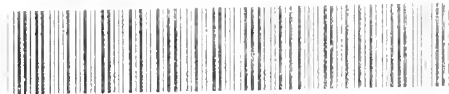
“Hang a poor woodland bird in a cage, if you can bear to look on such a captive, above a blossoming honeysuckle or hawthorn, and note his anguish of remembrance, his ecstasy of hope, his frantic effort to be free. But the accursed wires are between him and the familiar blossoms, between him and the blue sky. In a little while he realizes that he is a prisoner; the fluttering joy goes out of his heart and his wings; his feathers grow ruffled and dull; his eyes are veiled; he sits motionless and heartbroken, and the breeze of the spring-time blows past him, and never more will bear him on its buoyant way.”

If there exists no motive superior to comfort, utility, or convenience, then it were vain to plead. Then might we logically go on our way unconcerned, while our pleasure in animal death and pain continues, till at last “an immense agony will have ceased, and with it there will have passed away the last smile of the world’s youth.” But somewhere in the bloody struggle from mollusk to fish, from fish to reptile, from reptile to mammal, from mammal to man, we can believe that pity found its warrant in the birth of affection. Not all teachers, yet some, have proclaimed their recognition of love’s unselfish inspiration in the thirty thousand years, more or less, of known human record. Since men lived in caves it glowed in the passion of the mother for its young. Leading onward to immeasurable heights, it glorifies the taming of the wolf, and the transformation of the ferocious jackal, into the friendly dog. While the listeners are few, it is because of this, let us admit, that the voice of the pleader grows louder, and that we may look forward to the dawning of a wider mercy without despair.

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