

RECOLLECTIONS OF AUDUBON PARK.

BY GEORGE BIRD GRINNELL.

Plates XVII—XVIII.

THE interest which we all feel in John James Audubon, and in those connected with him, must plead my excuse for writing this and for the too frequent use of the first person singular.

I spent my boyhood in Audubon Park, and what I have to say relates to members of the Audubon family and chiefly to the woman to whom—quite as much as to her husband—we owe the greatest work on ornithology that America has produced. I should like to give you some impression of the personality of Madam Audubon and her son, John Woodhouse, and to make you see the surroundings of their later lives somewhat as I recall them.

Lucy Bakewell Audubon was a fit mate for her great husband, for her steadfastness and determination supplied qualities which in some degree he lacked. I believe that of the two she was the stronger—as she was the better balanced—character. If she did not have her husband's vivacity, charm, versatility and artistic talent, she possessed characteristics more important: the force to keep him up to his work, the faith to cheer his heart when discouraged, the industry and patience to earn money that he might continue his struggle, and the unyielding will to hold the family together. It was largely through her assistance and support that at last he won success.

A few years after the death of Audubon my father moved to Audubon Park. I was a very small boy about far enough advanced in polite learning to know A from B. At that time Madam Audubon conducted a little school for her grandchildren, which was attended also by some of the neighbors' children, of whom I was one. It was my first attendance at a school.

Except for two houses with the plots of land about them, the whole tract of Minnie's Land, or Audubon Park, then belonged to Madam Audubon. Victor, the eldest son, was bedridden as the result of an accident, and John Woodhouse, a man of great energy,



MRS. LUCY BAKEWELL AUDUBON

managed the property and looked after the sale of the books. The family had abundant land, which was more or less encumbered and quite unsalable, but its resources in money were small and uncertain. I have a vivid memory of an occasion when my father took me with him when he went to see Madam Audubon to conclude the purchase of a piece of land, and of the great relief, satisfaction, and even gratitude, that she expressed to him for his willingness to make the purchase. The scene touched me, even though for years afterward I did not understand its meaning.

John W. Audubon was quite without business training, but he worked hard and faithfully to relieve the family embarrassment. He built several houses in Audubon Park, which were sold or rented, and in a field east of what is now Broadway, built a large frame house which for some years was occupied as a tenement by workmen in the nearby sugar refinery. All these things brought in some money, but there was always a heavy burden of debt.

Madam Audubon was a most kindly, gentle, benignant woman. She was loved and admired by everyone and—by most people—I think a little feared, for she had the repose and dignity of a great lady, and was not given to jokes or laughter. With the children she unbent far more than with older people, and they loved her dearly, and took their small troubles to her with the utmost confidence. Yet the children too stood a little in awe of her, and in her presence were never mischievous or playful at inopportune times. Her grandchildren, of course, called her Grandma, and she became Grandma to many other little ones of different blood.

She lived with her son Victor and the school was carried on in her bedroom, the southeast corner of the second floor of that house. In the schoolroom she was tireless, passing from one child to another, seeing that each was properly at work, helping, explaining, encouraging. During the hours of school each child received a personal supervision that was practically continuous.

She was tall, slender, erect, always clad in black, and always wore her white cap. I never saw her without her spectacles.

The Audubon Park of that day was quite different from what it became later. Except for the land about the Audubon houses, near the river, and that immediately about two houses higher up on the hill, it was a tangle of underbrush and saplings, above

which rose many forest trees, some of them of great size. Much of the land between the present 155th and 157th Streets was overgrown with thick-standing young hemlocks, and no grass grew on the shaded ground. North of 157th Street were the "near woods," so-called, through which ran a brook, and this tract remained wild and unimproved until the year 1870, when it was added to Audubon Park. To the north of 158th Street was a larger piece of woodland. Great white pines stood about the Audubon houses, and on one of them grew a vine of fox grapes, some of which the children always managed to get, after the first hard frost of autumn.

At a little distance from the houses the Hudson River Railroad ran across a wide cove, on an embankment, and the tide from the river rose and fell in the ponds lying between this causeway and the old river bank. In these ponds the boys fished for killies and eels, and in summer went crabbing. In winter the quiet water froze and we had good skating. The ponds were long ago filled up and even their memory has passed away.

The interior of the Audubon House was attractive—an old-fashioned country house, more or less worn and shabby from the tramping and play of a multitude of children. In the hall were antlers of elk and deer, which supported guns, shot pouches, powder flasks, and belts. Pictures that now are famous hung on the walls. In the dining-room facing the entrance from the hall, was the portrait of the naturalist and his dog, painted by John Woodhouse Audubon. The painting of pheasants started by a dog—now in the American Museum—was in the parlor south of the hall, and the picture of the eagle and the lamb upstairs in Madam Audubon's bedroom. Everywhere were vivid reminders of the former owner of the land.

To the north of the Victor Audubon and east of the John Audubon house, on a hillock, was the wooden building with a cellar known as "the cave," where some of the old copper plates were stored for a time. This building was always locked, and the boys seldom had an opportunity to look into it, except when John Audubon opened it and they were permitted to follow him in. John Harden, the man who boxed these plates, died last summer in his eighty-ninth year, on the very borders of Audubon Park, where he had lived for sixty-seven years.

Grandma Audubon gave me my first conscious lesson about birds. I cannot remember a time when the common names of the more familiar species were not known to me, though I presume the list was not a long one. It included, however, the passenger pigeon, which was seen in the dogwood trees each autumn, and the white-headed eagle, which in winter was extremely abundant on the floating ice of the river and sometimes brought its captive fish to the trees in the park, there to eat them or as often to quarrel about them with its fellows, and sometimes to drop the prey.

One of my early recollections is of being called from the breakfast table one morning to look at a large flock of Passenger Pigeons that was feeding in a dogwood tree twenty-five or thirty feet from the house. There were so many of the birds that all could not alight in it, and many kept fluttering about while others fed on the ground, eating the berries knocked off by those above.

Thirty years ago an account was printed in 'The Auk' by Mr. Geo. N. Lawrence of birds at Manhattanville before 1850. Audubon Park was only a mile above Manhattanville, and fifteen or twenty years later than the time written of by Mr. Lawrence, conditions there had not changed. The region was still untouched country. The City of New York had not begun its northward march. On Sixth Avenue the pavements stopped at 23rd Street, and on Broadway the dirt road began at 36th Street.

It was Grandma Audubon who, when I was a little fellow, identified for me a bird that I had never seen before. One morning in late winter, or early spring, on my way to school I had almost reached the Victor Audubon house, when I saw a dozen or twenty small greenish birds feeding on the grass under a pine tree. I approached them slowly, trying to see what they were; and they did not fly, even when I was within a few feet of them. I did not know them, and they were so tame that I resolved to try to catch one. The crabnet used in summer always hung in the area under the Victor Audubon piazza, and backing away from the birds I ran there, secured the net, and returned. It was not difficult for a cautious lad to get near enough to the little birds to pass the net over one, and when I had caught it I rushed into the house and up to Grandma's room, and showed her my prize. She told me that the bird was a Red Crossbill—a young

one—pointed out the peculiarities of the bill, told me something about the bird's life, and later showed me a picture of it. Then after a little talk she and I went downstairs and out of doors, found the birds still feeding there, and set the captive free.

Two or three years later Mr. John Audubon performed a like service for a small companion and me. Neither of the two boys was as yet permitted to carry a gun. But, like some other boys, they managed now and then to get hold of guns, borrowed or stolen, and to go shooting. In the large piece of woods north of 158th Street we saw a flock of birds fly up into a tulip tree, and recognized them as 'pigeons,' but small ones. It happened to be my turn to use the gun, and after appropriate care in stalking I killed one of the flock. As we had supposed, it was a 'pigeon,' unlike those we knew, yet one whose picture we had seen. We found the plate of the bird—a Ground Dove—and to make sure we were right, took the bird to Mr. John Audubon who was mending fence at the corner of 158th Street and Riker's 12th Avenue, and asked him what it was. He looked at it with interest, and told us that it was a Ground Dove, adding that there were many of them further south, but that he had never seen one here before. This may have been in the autumn of 1860 or 1861—not in 1862 as I have said earlier.

After a year or two of attendance at Madam Audubon's school I was sent to a boys' school. For years, however, I took lessons in music and French from a granddaughter of Madam Audubon, daughter of John Woodhouse and granddaughter of Rev. John Bachman, and was always in close association with the family.

A favorite playground of the boys of Audubon Park was the loft of John Woodhouse's barn, where, piled up against the walls, were rows of wooden boxes full of bird skins, collected by the naturalist and his sons. We had been told not to meddle with these, and usually obeyed the injunction, knowing that if we did any harm, this playground would be closed to us. Here in the barn, too, were piles of the old red muslin bound 'Ornithological Biography.' One of these sets was given my father perhaps sixty years ago, but unfortunately the old red covers have been torn off and something more modern substituted for them.

One day in winter a great pine tree in front of the Victor Audubon house was cut down and while splitting it into lengths for



JOHN WOODHOUSE AUDUBON

Dear young friend
George Grinnell
If we should be by
accident in our journey,
I was tricked up you can
take possession of the
Eagle & Lamb, with
all the love & esteem
for yourself & Parents
that is possible for our
hearts to feel — Last if
we get safe the Eagle &
Lamb will be in my
will for you —
Farewell to our young friend
Loving Audubon. —

fuel the men found, almost in the center of the trunk, a cluster of small round black objects which proved to be leaden bullets—rifle balls. We boys were tremendously excited by the find and imagined an Indian tragedy where the captive was tied to the tree and tortured by being shot at, as was a common practice of the savage, according to the dime novels of the day. When Mr. John Audubon came up and saw the bullets and the wood, he recalled that many years before his father, some visitors and he had shot rifle at a target tacked upon this tree trunk, and here were the balls revealed by the ax.

When I was twelve or thirteen years old, some of us were given guns and made weekly excursions—no longer secret ones—after the robins, yellow hammers, and wild pigeons that during the fall migration congregated in the berry-bearing trees that were so abundant in the woods. At a somewhat later date the boys in autumn used to go up on the roof of our house and shoot at the wild pigeons passing over. Sometimes we killed several in a day, though there was much waste of ammunition.

With Jack Audubon, son of John Woodhouse, and the oldest grandson of the naturalist, I often in winter and spring went over to the Harlem River to lie in wait for muskrats on an arm of the river, which, if it existed today, would cover the old Polo Grounds—155-157th Streets and 8th Avenue—and run back about to the present 145th Street, west of 8th Avenue.

In those days wild ducks were often seen in spring and fall along the lower Hudson. Usually they were out of the reach of small boys, though I remember that Jack Audubon killed a Blue-winged Teal on the Hudson in the early 60's. Nevertheless, when we made excursions up to Dyckman's Flats we occasionally killed in the marshes there and along the Harlem River, a wood duck, teal or black duck, but such great game was most unusual. Almost always at the proper season of the year there were many small shore birds on the Dyckman marshes, which the little boys hunted faithfully. English Snipe were often started there, but I do not know that any of us ever killed one. Sometimes we went as far as "Bronson's"—now Van Cortland Park—where quail were started and an osprey had its nest in a tall tree that no one could climb.

I saw John Woodhouse Audubon almost daily, for as a playmate of his sons I was always in and out of his house, and besides, he was a close friend of my father, and often in the evening came to our house. He was a most kindly man, but sometimes spoke quickly and I was a little afraid of him. If he felt like coming up to our house in the evening he came out of his door and stood before his house, a hundred yards distant from ours, and shouted my father's name, and when answered called out, "If you have nothing to do, I'll come up and play you a game of billiards." A little later he appeared, hatless and without overcoat, often powdered with snow if it was storming, and shod with old-fashioned carpet slippers from which he stamped the snow as he opened the front door.

Often John Audubon painted in the barn, and the boys stood at a little distance and in silence watched him as the subject grew under his brush. He had a beautiful mare, Donna, of which he was very fond, that he painted.

Often he received natural history specimens from a distance and we boys gathered about him and with breathless interest waited to see what wonderful things he would draw forth from his boxes. I recall especially a great white arctic hare that he held up for us to see, which to my wondering eyes seemed longer than I was tall. With the hare were some dark colored birds, which must have been Spruce Grouse, and some white Ptarmigan—strange creatures from the North.

The picture of the eagle and the lamb always possessed a fascination for me. I greatly admired it and often talked about it to Grandma Audubon, and on one occasion she told me that after her death the picture should be mine. Boylike, I treasured this memory, but the promise was not again referred to. However, on the day that Madam Audubon departed for Louisville, September 18, 1873, I received from her a note, perhaps one of the last she ever penned, which said that in case of accident to her on her journey south I should take possession of the eagle and the lamb, and that if she and her granddaughter safely reached their destination the picture would be in her will for me. It now hangs in my house.

I never again saw Grandma Audubon, for in 1874 she died—full of years. She was a great woman and as good as great. The

help she gave to the people about her who needed it—rich as well as poor—will be remembered as long as those who knew her shall live. Some tributes to her greatness have been printed—but no words, written or spoken, can ever tell of all the good she did.

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COURTSHIP IN BIRDS.

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THE difference between the mentality of birds and of man is enormous and we must be on our guard against imputing purely human motive to the lower animals. On the other hand the difference between man and the lower animals in many important matters is not one of kind, but one merely of degree.

A gull will drag a dried fish from the upper beach to the water to soften it before eating, a grackle will dip a tough bit of biscuit in the water for the same purpose, and a man will soften a hard crust in his coffee. How much is sub-conscious instinct or reflex action in some or all of these cases and how much is self-conscious reasoning and forethought—it is not my purpose to discuss here. To call it instinct in all cases in the lower animals and reason in all cases in man may possibly savor of conceit.

The desire to live, to obtain food and to mate are primitive inborn instincts common to both the lower animals and to man. To gratify these instincts similar actions are resorted to by both the lower animals and man. The actions of a child desiring food from a table and those of a dog under the same circumstances are very much alike. Each appeals by voice and actions for the food, each is anxious to please the owner of the food, and each—unless the point has been reached in its experience of life when it fears the consequences of unlawful acts—will avail itself of an opportunity to surreptitiously snatch the food.

In the same way the desire of the male bird to please the female more than its rivals please the same bird appeals to us as a very