

An Unpublished Poem of Alexander Wilson

BY ROBERT P. SHARPLES

While nobody now lives to tell of a personal acquaintance with Alexander Wilson, the ornithologist, some of us can recall tales told in our youth by persons who did know him. And it is tradition in our family that good old Grandmother Jackson, as she was known in later days, was a pupil of Wilson while he taught school in the suburbs of Philadelphia in 1800. Wilson, as is well known, aspired to poetical fame; but while some of his work was meritorious, much of it was of very inferior quality.

One day he was going through a woods on the John Bartram farm when he caught a "Hen Hawk" alive. He took it home with him, but had no place to keep it. Shortly afterward the following rhyme was penned and sent with the hawk to his neighbor, Samuel Gibson, who was Grandmother Jackson's father. It has been treasured in the family ever since, though there is no record as to whether the appeal met with a favorable response. Mr. Witmer Stone informs me that he has in his possession another copy of the same poem taken from the original in the possession of Dr. Samuel Gibson Dixon, President of the Academy of Natural Sciences, and great-grandson of Samuel Gibson.

THE HEN HAWK'S PETITION

A Hawk, a noble Hawk, am I,
Who boldly sailed the lofty sky,
Until a Scotchman, like a Fox,
Surprised me on John Bartram's rocks.
He such an Indian war whoop sounded,
Like Pat of old he me confounded,
And home to Maximilian Leech's
Bore me, grappled in his Clutches.

Now in the chimney corner rammed
Between two ugly baskets crammed,
So dark I scarce can see to eat
Or tell the colour of my feet;
So narrow, too, whene'er I turn
My tail and wings are sadly torn.
Now as the Scotchman I suppose,
(I wish my claws were in his nose),
Intends in spite of law or reason
To keep me close shut up in prison,
I beg your honour would engage
To fit me up a proper cage.
You play the carpenter completely,
Whate'er you do, you do it neatly.
I know you are a man of merit
Your fences, fields and barn declare it.
Oft have I viewed your works with wonder
As o'er your fields I sailed for plunder;
Not on your fowls to make my dinner,
No! birds and mice, upon my honour.
So I beg you will pity my condition
And grant this once my sad petition
And I will promise and declare,
If e'er again I wing the air,
Your hens and turkeys, ducks and geese,
For ever more shall dwell in peace.

A. Hen Hawk.

From Between the Baskets.