

A Sketch of the Life of Samuel White—
Ornithologist, Soldier, Sailor, and Explorer.

BY HIS SON, S. A. WHITE.

VII. THE ORNITHOLOGIST.

We are now approaching the last few months of my father's life, months full of activity and ornithological work.

He returned from Cape York and New Guinea in the early part of 1879, and, on making a trial of his new steam yacht, "The Eclipse" (the machinery for which he had imported from England), he found that the steamship drew too much water for successful navigation in the shallow seas to the east of Australia. She was disposed of, and Samuel White set about the building of a new craft, and this time it was built of red gum, to resist the coral reefs. All the timber was sawn from trees on his estate at the Reedbeds, and he was very particular, examining every plank before it was used. It can be well understood that all his time and energy was required for the execution of this big undertaking. I will now quote an article which appeared in the daily press of April 7, 1880, the day upon which Samuel White started upon his last expedition.

Under the heading "Scientific Expedition to New Guinea," the writer says:—"Amongst the men who contribute to the fame of a new colony, but whose deeds are as unostentatious as their names, were once unfamiliar to the old world beyond the seas, are some of the sons of our old colonists, who venture forth into the unexplored regions of the interior in search of new country, and endure the most extreme hardships in their pursuit after wealth. There are few, however, who, with ample means at their command, would give up the comforts and luxuries of home life to risk unforeseen dangers and privations in the field of scientific research—the object of whose life would be the collecting and classification of specimens of the flora and fauna of the South; the gathering of shells that stud the seashore, of fossils that lie hidden in caves, or the capture of winged denizens of the air, whose brilliant plumage is a charm for ever in the eyes of the ornithologist.

"Some six miles out of Adelaide, on the road to Henley Beach, stands a handsome, well-built residence, portions of which have only recently been completed, while other parts of the homestead exhibit unmistakeable signs of age. This is the abode of the son of one of our earliest settlers, Mr. John White, who arrived in the Colony in 1836. Mr. Samuel White, possessed of ample means to live a retired life, has displayed a passion for ornithology, and in his pursuit of specimens of the feathered tribe has explored nearly every portion of the Australian Continent, and now intends to carry his investigations into a more distant region. Mr. White first commenced his scientific travels about the year 1862, when he endeavoured to sail up the Murray River, but being baffled in this, he made

his way on land, with but one companion, into the interior beyond Lake Hope. This trip took some considerable time, and the naturalist met with great difficulties in getting part of his collection within the bounds of civilization. After some minor expeditions in 1868 he traversed the greater part of Queensland, landing at Cleveland Bay, and following the River Burdekin for a few hundred miles. His brother, William, accompanied him on this trip, and suffered so much from the effects of it that he has never ventured on another. Fever, ague, encounters with the blacks, and being reduced to a state of starvation were amongst the privations these venturesome ornithologists had to endure. On his return to his home Mr. Samuel White informs us that he discovered a 'fair specimen' that he captured by fairer means than by the use of his rifle—his wife, and after the wedding tour in England he made another exploring trip to Cleveland Bay, Cooktown, and Trinity Bay, and in the dense tropical forests there caught the fever, and was laid up for a considerable time. He would have died had it not been for the attention and kindness of the natives. He was taken by a Batavian steamer to the nearest point to New Guinea—Thursday Island—and after that spent some considerable time on the south coast of New Guinea, principally in the Papuan Gulf, on Yule Island up the Katow River, and often in company with the Torres Strait 'pirates.' He was quite alone, but went amongst the natives and 'pirates' with perfect immunity from harm. He describes the 'pirates' as being a most genial and hospitable set of pearlers, and says he was never better treated in his life than on the shell boats which belonged to them. During the twelve months he was on the New Guinea coast he collected about 800 bird skins, and since his return twelve months ago he has stored them away till his return from the next expedition. Unable to rest ashore, and enjoy the quiet routine of life at the Reedbeds, Mr. White has determined upon making another exploring expedition to New Guinea, and for that purpose has had constructed a schooner yacht of 80 tons, in which he will sail for his destination to-day. He will take his wife and family with him to Sydney. Two naturalists, or taxidermists, will accompany the expedition, Mr. F. W. Andrews, who is well known in this Colony, and Mr. J. Cockrell, who has collected largely in the Southern seas. A captain, chief officer, and twelve hands will compose the crew. Mr. White has named the craft the 'Elsea,' after his wife. He proposes to finish fitting out in Sydney, then to proceed with all haste up the coast to catch the first of the south-east trade winds, pro-

ceeding inside the Barrier Reef, and touching, if time should permit, at several islands and places where rare birds are to be procured, but his chief hunting ground will be the Charles Irwin Mountains, Aru Islands, etc. He estimates that he will have to return to Sydney for stores in about twelve months, and that in two years he will gather the largest and most valuable collection of specimens ever made in the Southern seas. He has plenty of small arms, two brass four-pounder guns, one on each quarter, mounted on swivels, and a long two-pounder, which will be mounted in mid-ship, and a ton of shot on board, and will employ about eight guns in the mountains, where he expects to fall in with the rarest and choicest kinds, including birds of paradise. He will collect duplicates for purpose of exchange, and on the return to Adelaide, which may not be for four, or even five, years hence, contemplates adding new wings to his residence at the Reedbeds for the safe keeping of his specimens. Mr. White has furnished some interesting particulars of his craft:—‘She is a fore and aft schooner of about 80 tons; shipwright’s measurements:—length over all, 65 feet; breadth, 16 feet; with 9 feet 6 inches depth of hold; the keel is of jarrah in one-piece; the planking inside and out is of red gum. . . . The seas to traverse will be difficult and dangerous to navigate, hence the unusual strength of the craft. The scantling is quite heavy enough for a 500-ton ship, and you will perceive I have done away with the usual mode of fastening with trenails, and used copper instead, which is stronger and more durable. There are over two tons of pure copper and nearly the same of yellow metal distributed about the hull. . . . Be her sailing qualities what they may, I must take the responsibility upon myself, as I consulted my own ideas as to my requirements, and modelled and drafted the work myself. The hull was completed and launched on the 14th of February, and named the *Elsea*, after my wife, who accompanies me as far as Sydney, and to whom I am greatly indebted for much valuable assistance in preparing for my voyage.’

‘The *Elsea* sailed from Port Adelaide on Sunday last, and has since been lying off Henley Beach, taking in baggage, etc. Mr. White intends sailing this evening, or by daylight on Thursday, and we can only wish him and his family *bon voyage*. We need add nothing more than good wishes for health and success of an enthusiastic scientist, who assures us seriously that all the hardships of a disastrous trip and six months’ illness with fever were compensated for by the discovery of a new species of butterfly.