

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

BY HIS SON, (Capt.) S. A. WHITE, M.B.O.U.

IX.—THE ORNITHOLOGIST AND SAILOR.

Sandy Cape was rounded before daylight of May 28. The wind during the night had been light, and very little headway had been made. A little after sunrise Lady Elliots Island was abeam of the vessel, and soon afterwards the wind dropped. At 2 p.m. the yacht was rolling about in a dead

calm. Very soon a great many sharks put in an appearance, and came quite close to the sides of the yacht. They sailed round lazily, but would not take a piece of beef which baited a hook for them. It was interesting to watch such a number of these blunt-nosed huge creatures swimming about, with several sucking fish attached to the body of each monster, hanging on to every part—above, beneath, and on the fins. The sharks appeared not to take the slightest notice of them. The suckers attach themselves by the flat tops of their heads, which are provided with a broad, flat top and a flexible rim, which acts in the same manner as a piece of wet leather when applied to a wet surface. When the sucker attaches itself to the upper surface of the shark the backs of the two fish are presented to each other, and the light under surface of the sucker gleams in the water against the dark background formed by the upper surface of the shark. One or two sucking fish were caught with hooks, and measured from 18 to 24 inches in length. Several sharks were struck with harpoons; and they were seen swimming about with great white gashes in their bodies where the iron had struck them, but seemed to take little heed of it. The wind kept very light for the next forty-eight hours, there being just a light air from the N., which enabled the craft to dodge on a little, although she was close up to it.

At noon on the 29th Bustard Head lay right abeam. The sun was beginning to make itself felt as a gentle reminder that the tropics were being approached. The light breeze died away again, and the vessel was becalmed till the afternoon of the 30th, when a light breeze sprang up from the N.E., and later freshened considerably. The captain fastened on to a porpoise, and he was hauled on board. Several sea snakes about five feet long were seen during the morning, and also a very large turtle. During the night the wind died away again, but at daylight next morning it came up from the S.

The nights had been clear and cold, with heavy dews, and the mornings cloudy. By the evening of the 31st the yacht was off Cape Clinton, and the breeze keeping up all night, by daylight the next morning we were among the Cumberland Islands. The wind shifted backwards and forwards from the S. to the S.E., but blew fresh, the weather being typical for the winter in the South Tropics. The sky was overcast and gloomy all day, and the sea dark and angry looking—this was the first of the trade winds' influence. The vessel

threaded her way all day among the islands, at first through the Percy Islands, and then others. They were desolate looking places; some mere rocks jutting out of the sea, with many sea birds upon them, bearing an inhospitable and barren appearance, and seemingly of an ironstone formation, without timber of any description, but during the afternoon they improved in appearance, and some looked green on the slopes, and it was noticeable that some of the gullies were timbered with pines (*Araucaria*). Later we noticed that dense vegetation of pines and other trees covered the sides of the gullies nearly to the top, and that the islands bore a volcanic appearance. At sundown the yacht, under the orders of the owner, brought up under an island—one of the Cumberland, marked "M Island" on the chart—in five fathoms of water over a sandy bottom, where she lay fairly quietly, it being an inlet on the western side of the island. There was no time to go ashore that night, and next morning the wind blowing strongly made the anchorage unsafe, so there was no alternative but to get under weigh again. During the night it was seen that the scrub and grass on the island was burning in several places, which clearly indicated that there were natives upon it. After getting away at daylight the captain made some mistake in his bearings, and ran into Repulse Bay, but, discovering his mistake in time, hauled to the wind, and weathered Cape Conway. At 2 p.m. we passed the lighthouse and Dent Island, and as two natives came off in a canoe the captain sent a slip to the light keeper to report the boat. After passing the light a course was made around Whitsunday Island, to a nook on the N. side, where Samuel White landed three guns, and went into the scrub, but he was much disappointed, for they saw nothing to collect. Some of the crew landed, and tried out some oil from the blubber of a porpoise which had been harpooned a few days previously. It was late before the men came off, and in the meantime several natives had come on board with some fish, which were gladly purchased, and made a welcome change to the menu. During the evening some of the crew busied themselves fishing, and caught a few very nice fish of several species, some like the red schnapper found in the vicinity of Kangaroo Island, S.A. Whitsunday Island is a large one, situated near the mainland, and divided from it by a passage of a few miles. This, like all the islands around, it, was of exceeding beauty—like fairylands opening out on every side. Some presented green, grassy slopes, with

wooded gullies, pine-clad hills, clothed with *Araucaria cunninghamii* to the top, and others little sandy beaches, with small flats at the back, over which are scattered beautiful green ornamental trees, like a park. Others again were thickly clothed with jungle and palms. The landing place at Whitsunday Island was very picturesque. After running through a narrow passage between two islands for about two or three miles a sandy beach was seen, and Samuel White gave orders to bring the yacht up, and the anchor was dropped in four fathoms of water, smooth as a lagoon, over a bottom of soft ooze. A landing was made upon a small patch of sandy beach, near a rocky gorge, up which Samuel White and his collectors scrambled for about a mile. On either hand stood points of land or elevated knolls, thickly covered in pines (*Araucaria*), with here and there a slope of golden-green grass, which, from the ship, looked most charming, but on reaching it we found it to be steep and stony, the grass, although green, long and coarse. The place was very bare of bird life, all that were seen were fruit pigeons, pittas, *colluricincla*, *rhipidura*, *campephaga*, and *sericornis*. Next morning at daylight this most energetic ornithologist landed again with his collectors, and in his notes he says: "This morning at daylight three of us landed with guns, and proceeded up the stony gorge to the top of the island, but saw little in bird life. One of my collectors procured a fine White Gosshawk, and two other small birds were taken. I found two species of *Halia*, one about the size of a large marble, marked with light and dark rings, and a small one, which I found attached to the under surface of leaves. We were on board and under weigh again before noon, and the birds collected were preserved. With a strong breeze Port Denison was passed at 2 p.m. We are fairly in the trades now; the weather is not cloudy, but hazy." The yacht was kept under weigh all night, owing to the coast being fairly clear of islands. At eight o'clock Cape Bowling Green was passed, and at four in the morning Cleveland Light; at 2 p.m. the south end of Hinchinbrook Island was abeam. In Samuel White's notes under June 4th he says: "I expect to be at the Barnard Islands early to-morrow; the run yesterday was 157 miles. It is rather remarkable we passed through the Whitsunday Passages on the 111th anniversary of Cook's discovery, he having passed through it on the 3rd of June, 1769. Navigation is much simplified since Cook's time; there are now soundings in every direction,

with lights on every dangerous or convenient point. . To-day I made up a lot of cartridges, ready for operations on the Barnard Islands, where I expect to find the beautiful and rare rifle bird (*Ptiloris victoriae*.)”

Dunk Island was reached on the 4th, but it was after 11 p.m. before the N.W. side was reached, owing to the wind dying right away. Anchor was dropped under a big rock at the N.W. side of Dunk Island, where the *Elsa* rolled about till four o'clock next morning, when she was under weigh again, with the Barnard Islands in sight. The wind freshened, and the islands were made about eight o'clock, but an anchorage was not reached till after 10 a.m., owing to sailing around two or three times, so as to pick up a smooth one, and it was at last decided that the north-west corner of the middle island, where it was moderately smooth, would answer the best for landing.

