

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

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

X. THE ORNITHOLOGIST AND SAILOR.

So soon as possible after the yacht came to anchor a boat was put off, and Samuel White with two of his collectors landed on the eastern island, and to the ornithologists' great delight, they secured several rife birds *Ptiloris paradisea victoriae* all in good plumage. One can understand the keen delight these lovely birds gave my father, especially to capture them in their natural habitat. The collectors came off to the vessel at sunset, and the owner gave orders to lay at anchor for a few days. Samuel White in his notes says, "The island I was on was a small one about half a mile long, very scrubby, from the sea to top, and thickly matted with vines, and almost impregnable in places. The birds were few, there being but three or four species, the rife birds were moderately numerous for that family of birds on such a small island. The whole island was scratched over by megapodes, consequently there were no land shells seen. I saw several large logs of cedar lying on the beach. The weather was very unpleasant. Squalls of rain began after dark last night, and continued all day."

The next day Samuel White remained on board, and served out the week's stores, and skinned a dozen or more birds. Some of the crew went on shore. The collectors landed on one of the islands, but came off at midday without

having secured anything. They went off again in the afternoon and returned after dark with only one bird between them and complained most bitterly of the roughness of the place. In his notes under the heading of June 7th, 1880, Samuel White says, "This morning three of us landed on separate islands, I went on No. 1, and secured five birds, Messrs. Cockerell and Andrews only procured one each off the two main islands. We returned in the afternoon, and went out again, but got nothing. This is our last day here. We have worked all the islands, and I have secured some good skins for my collection. The Barnard Islands lay in a line off shore in a direction a little N. of E. The middle island is the smallest. All three are very steep on the sides and stony, and covered to the top with small timber of various kinds, including *Castanospermum*, and other trees with dense undergrowth all matted together with vines and "Lawyers." In some places I saw the tree hibiscus with large yellow flowers, cabbage palms pandanus, and some fine specimens of native banana. The leaves of this plant would measure two feet broad, and ten to fifteen feet long. On the South side of No. 1 island I found a nice spring of fresh water with a kind of couch grass growing around it, this spring appeared to me to be permanent. The soil seems to be a clay of a dark red or grey brown, which turns up in small nodules as the megapodes scratch it about. Although all three islands are covered in a dense mass of vegetation, the fauna was meagre, the scrubs were dark and noiseless, with the exception of the occasional call of a megapode, the rifle bird being the only thing that was attractive to me. Of butterflies I only saw two species, and few of those, land shells and beetles I saw none, a few dead marine shells were collected with a few crabs. The Barnard Islands were places I had long wished to see, and my visit has been a successful one, for I have secured some splendid specimens of the rare rifle bird. The master had the men bringing off firewood this afternoon, and we are ready for a start in the morning. The weather to-day, although cloudy, was free from rain." After having been at anchor for three days under the small middle island in six fathoms of water over sand mud the yacht was got under weigh again at an early hour on the morning of the 8th with a light wind which soon freshened, and by two p.m. the vessel was between Cape Grafton and Fitzroy Island. One of the collectors, Mr. Andrews, was very unwell from the effects of fatigue and exposure on the Barnard Islands, the work from

all appearances seemed too much for him. At this stage Samuel White makes the following note, "I am now sorry that I brought Andrews. None but very hardy men are fit for this work, some of the crew are complaining." When passing Cape Grafton several natives were seen running along the beach, and their camp fires were plainly seen. A few minutes before sunset the yacht brought up on the N.W. side of Double Island. Samuel White took a boat, and pulled on to the island to the S.W. where there was a sand spit. Many sea birds were seen, and *Ptilotis versicolor* heard, but it was too dark to do any collecting, and it was long after dark before he returned. The land passed during the day appeared mountainous, wild, and rugged, thinly timbered, and very rocky, rocks or bare earth appeared in every direction, the whole country bore a cheerless and inhospitable appearance. Upon passing Fitzroy Island to the West a nice sandy bay appeared on the N. side well sheltered from the S.E. "trades." The island is of considerable extent, very stony, and but lightly wooded. After passing Fitzroy Island, Green Island appeared on the starboard side—a low sandy islet of coral formation, covered with bush and a few small trees. Here the Torres straits pigeons assemble in the breeding season (which is about November) in vast flocks until the whole island is a mass of white birds, and a stick thrown amongst them cannot fail to bring down several. The flesh of this pigeon is good food, but not equal in delicacy to the ground pigeons, the pigeons in question being strictly a fruit eater, living in the trees, and never descending to the ground. Next morning before dawn the yacht was under weigh again with a light wind, and soon after daylight the curious and remarkable peak which attracted the attention of that great navigator Capt. Cook over a hundred years ago about this time of the year which was named the "Peter Bottle" came in sight with a coil of mist around its neck. The wind continued light. At 10 a.m. Cape Tribulation showed up, and a large steamer passed (one of the Dutch boats) and the officers seemingly knew the yacht for they waved their caps for some time. It was hoped that Cook Town would have been reached before dark, but this was impossible for there were 50 miles to go, and the wind was very light. The weather was beautiful and fine with the wind very light. Later on the wind freshened, so Cook Town was made that evening. The anchorage was not picked up very easily, so a pilot came out and boarded the yacht, and brought her up to her moorings.

Next morning when daylight broke it was found the yacht was brought up near the powder magazine under the hill. The tradespeople brought off fresh stores, and Samuel White went on shore to see the customs, pay for pilot, etc. In his notes Samuel White says "I was not interested in the town, where I saw a number of Chinamen, and was told they made good citizens, and that I could procure Chinese labour for 20/ per month. Although I wanted six more men I did not venture to fill up with Chinamen, for I wanted collectors, and according to my experience of the mongolian race they are too meek and averse to shedding blood to make good collectors, and seem to lack the savage pleasure of hunting and taking life which is so strongly shown in the "Britisher." The country about Cook Town at the time was hilly, forest country, in places coarse grass was growing, and many of the deep gullies further inland were filled with dense dark scrub. The country along the sealine improved as one proceeded to Trinity Bay. The hills were clothed in dense green vegetation. The harbour of Cook Town is well situated when once a vessel is over the bar, but here the water shoals to one fathom at low water tide, but at high-water there is about 20 ft. on it. Where the yacht lay at anchor there were two fathoms over mud. Telegrams having been sent, and answers received, Samuel White went on board, and next morning about 6.30 the *Elsa* was under weigh again, some delay having been caused through fouling the moorings when the anchor was heaved. The pilot came on board, and with a strong breeze the yacht was soon out of his jurisdiction. After weathering Cape Bedford, the vessel was eased off, and at 2 p.m. had passed Lizard Island and stood over to the Howick Group. The wind was very fresh from S. of E., and No. 3 Island of the Howick Group was reached half an hour before sunset; the anchor was dropped in seven fathoms of water when the vessel lay moderately still.

Samuel White had a boat lowered, and accompanied by Messrs. Cockerell and Andrews, landed on the N.W. end of the island, which lies low and sandy. There was little to collect, and by dark the two collectors had not secured a thing, while their chief had secured half a dozen honey eaters. They were mostly *Ptilotis versicolor*. They were procured in a broad leaved bush which was growing very thickly on the extreme N.W. end of the island. Next day, the 12th, sail was again made at an early hour, but the wind was not so good as

on the previous day, and only 90 miles were made. At noon Flinders Group was passed, and just then there arose a dense cloud of mist or smoke, and Samuel White remarking upon it in his notes, says:—"The officers thought it was dust and that they smelt dust, but it appeared to me like smoke; however, they, fearing a 'buster,' lowered the topsails and stood by for a general take in. Soon an unmistakable smell of smoke and pieces of ashes dispelled the delusion, when up went the topsails again. Towards mid-day, the wind freshened, and we are in hopes of reaching No. 1 Clermond Island to-night where I intend staying to visit the great Egret's rookeries. The wind has been a good deal easterly which has caused us to jibe several times. At 2 p.m. to-day I reckon we are about 15 miles from No. 1 Island." Just before sunset the island was reached, and the yacht brought up in eight fathoms over sand and mud, about the fifth of a mile from the shore. A boat was swung out, and Samuel White was pulled ashore, landing on a sand bank on the N.W. corner of the island. Between this and the high land lay a broad flat the whole length of the island, covered at high water, and on which grew mangrove trees in large and thick masses, their roots intertwining into great impenetrable barriers. The mangrove tree when growing singly presents the appearance of growing, or standing on numerous legs like a gigantic spider, but when growing in thick belts, the trees appear to be standing on a vast bed of brushwood to which are attached thousands of oysters and other shell-fish, and underneath crawl a variety of crustaceae over mud that would in places sink a man to the middle in black stinking ooze. While overhead in the tall mangroves (some up to 40 feet in height) large rookeries of Ibis Spoon-bill Cranes and Egrets, with their families in all stages were seen, producing a deafening clatter, and babel of voices which varied from the harsh croak of the adult bird to the faint squeak of the featherless "squab." Their rough nests composed of sticks were stuck about carelessly in every direction, and the repulsive looking slimy excreta which covered every leaf and branch could be smelt a mile away to leeward. It was noticed that each species had its own rookery separate from the others, with here and there a colony of flying foxes which kept up an incessant chattering and squeaking—a noise something between the chattering of a monkey and the harsh squeak of an opossum. They hung in hundreds to the branches by their hind claws, with their heads downwards, and snapped at each

other. These animals have a repulsive appearance and disagreeable odour in their fur; they live entirely upon fruit and vegetable diet; and to those who are not prejudiced against them they form an excellent article of food, they are in fact, delicious. The flesh is white, tender, and exceedingly fat; the carcase would weigh several pounds, and a stretch of wing up to four feet. Little more could be done than a look round for darkness came on, and the wind began to rise, so the party went on board again.
