

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

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

### XIII. THE ORNITHOLOGIST AND SAILOR.

Under the date of Monday, 28th of June, Samuel White wrote:—"I did not get as many birds as I expected, returned at noon to the yacht, and went out again this afternoon and procured a few more. Andrews went out with the gun, and after a short time in the scrub became quite exhausted. Among the birds taken to-day were some beautiful parrots. No Birds-of-Paradise yet, but a lot of plumes were offered to me to-day, and fifteen shillings a piece was refused. Notwithstanding I have been trying to persuade myself to the contrary I begin to be convinced that I have made a great mistake by not getting native gunners from Sydney or Thursday Island. My white men are too soft and unaccustomed to the climate to be of much use, and labour is not to be got here. The crew have been cutting wood and bringing it off all day to the vessel. The weather has been squally, and travelling through the scrub very uncomfortable, as we were wet to the skin all day; shall only stay here to-morrow, the country is too low."

Next morning at sunrise Samuel White and his taxidermist (Andrews) landed with guns, and returned at noon, Andrews only having four birds, while my father brought off ten specimens. Andrews was too distressed to land in the afternoon, but the owner of the vessel went off and brought back several more birds. His other taxidermist (J. Cockerell) remained on board owing to a bad foot, but he put the time in curing specimens. Some traders visited the ship during the day offering live parrots, also paradise plumes. In the evening the native teacher, who was a man from Amboina, came on-board. My father writes:—"This native teacher is a very quiet and well-behaved man. He, unfortunately, cannot speak a word of English, but I am able to make myself understood with a few words in Dutch. I made him a few presents of coffee, tobacco, and a knife. I wished him to procure for me a man to show me the nearest village, where the natives captured the great birds of paradise; but after making enquiries, he said they would not come with me because they were afraid. I believe they were afraid we were going to interfere with their trade, as they do a good business in plumes."

Soon after this some natives brought off plumes for sale, and through the teacher I was able to purchase fifteen plumes at a slight reduction on twenty shillings, but they would not deal for anything but money." Heavy showers passed over during the day, and those who went into the scrub were sopping wet, for all the trees and shrubs showered down water long after the rain ceased. On the morning of the 30th the yacht left the anchorage off the village of Maykor. Just as the vessel was getting under weigh a canoe came off with some cocoanuts and a *megapode* egg, the latter had a fledged young one in it. The natives were made a present of coffee and sugar. The wind died away, and very little headway was made; a current setting in, the anchor was dropped in six fathoms between Maykor and the small island off the North end. On July 1st the anchor was lifted, but the wind was very light, and at ten o'clock the yacht was about four miles off shore. Samuel White gave orders for a boat to be lowered, and he, with his two taxidermists were pulled on shore by two of the crew. They remained here until 3 p.m., while the vessel worked up. They then went on board, having obtained six birds, but this was not a good collecting ground. When the boat left the island, Andrews could not be found, so one of the crew with the dingy was sent off to look for him. At ten o'clock, nothing having been heard of Andrews or the man with the boat, an officer with a boat's crew was sent to search for the two men. The schooner continued on her way southwards, about five miles along the coast of Wokan, when a deep inlet or mouth of a creek was sighted, and here the vessel was brought up in nine fathoms. In the middle of the channel it was found there was fifteen fathoms of water, and a very strong tide running out. Samuel White in his notes says:—"This channel we have anchored in is, I believe, the Watelai Channel, and looks like the one in Wallace's chart, and not like that marked on either of the admiralty charts I have before me. Here I have dropped (by accident, whilst trying to make a village that was seen from the ship's decks), on the very place I wanted to reach. Up this channel is the village of Wanumbai—Wallace's old collecting ground. At dark a prau came alongside, and the crew pointed up stream and said Wanumbai, so I believe this is correct, although at Maykor I was directed round Dobbo to reach Wanumbai. Great numbers of fish were jumping out of the water all around the vessel, but would not take a bait. A small whale was also playing

around all the evening. The weather all the morning was hot and sultry; in the afternoon heavy clouds came up, and a steady rain set in all the evening." At seven o'clock next morning the man with the dingy turned up without having seen anything of Andrews, and several hours later the second boat's crew made their appearance with the report that they had not seen any trace of the missing man. At noon Samuel White left with a fresh crew in one of the ship's boats, and made along the coast to the north, and after a few hours' search, found Andrews in a hollow tree, where he had spent the night. He was taken on board, seemingly little the worse for his adventure. All Andrews could find to eat were some large green frogs, which he described as being of excellent flavour. During the afternoon Samuel White, with Cockerell, landed on the island of Maykor, but they had barely set foot on land when heavy rain fell, and continued till sunset, and they had to return to the craft without procuring anything. Under this date my father writes:—"Just before sunset, when the weather showed signs of clearing, I ordered a boat out and landed on the reef close by at low water, to look for shells, but there was nothing worth gathering. A canoe full of natives came off this evening with shells and a few birds, all of which I purchased to encourage them to collect. There are *Paradisca apoda* near here I know, for I heard them this morning. I rose before it was light, to sit on the deck and listen to the sounds and calls of birds, and among numerous voices I heard that of the great bird of paradise. Being otherwise occupied to-day, I shall endeavour to make their acquaintance to-morrow." The weather all the morning was fine and hot, but the afternoon was wet. Samuel White in his notes under July 3rd, says:—"This morning I took Cockerell and landed on the left bank of the Watelai Channel, or what is according to Wallace's chart, Wokan. We pushed our way several miles back, but the country was exceedingly rough and unproductive. The moment I landed I heard and saw several of the great birds of paradise, and in a few minutes shot one, but found it was a female, and of a chocolate brown colour all over, much darker on the head and chest. During the day I procured four, and saw several more, but they were all of the same colour. They are as large as a small crow. The old birds being like the rifle birds of Australia, very shy, and surrounded by perhaps fifty females and immature birds. We returned to the craft in the afternoon wet to the skin as usual." Before dark that evening,

Cockerell landed again, this time on the other side of the channel, but returned after dark without collecting anything, and reported that the scrub was almost impenetrable.

As soon as the natives sighted the "Ragah" (meaning my father) going on board, they would swarm off to the ship, and the decks of the latter would be soon covered with their dark-forms, each one having some article to barter in the shape of living birds, reptiles, shells, insects, arrows, plumes, etc. They drive hard bargains, but nearly always want rupees. They are very persevering and patient, behaving in a most quiet and becoming manner. Always asking more than they take; time appears to be of little object to them, for if they cannot make a bargain to-day, they come again to-morrow and the next day. The traders in plumes were all Malays or Macassar men, and seemed to set a standard commercial value on them to which they descend, but no lower. If trade such as calico, tobacco, cutlery, be offered in barter, they will take it up quietly, turn it over twenty times, count it over and over, calculate the quality and commercial value to them, and if they can get no more and can see a profit, they take it up and walk away. Again turning to my father's notes about this time I find:—"Every day I have been here I have been trying to trade for fresh birds of paradise, but I now believe that none of the dealers catch the birds themselves, but barter for them with the Aru natives or 'Blackangtanna men' as they are called, which really means 'back country men.' They are therefore not able to get fresh birds. I have been offering a gun a piece for them, which is equal to £2 15/ a piece, but have not succeeded yet. I will go to Mr. Wallace's old collecting ground 'Wanumbai,' and try the natives there. Plumes are to be had in plenty indeed. I have been so pestered with traders to-day that I have had to put off much of my work till the evening, and then they will come off up to eleven p.m. offering plumes for sale as well as live parrots of various species, some of them most gorgeous in colour. To-day, for the first time, natives brought off *Cuscus*. One was a light straw coloured animal, the body beautifully spotted with black, and of a salmon pink about the face; the other was pale sandy brown, with a dark stripe down the back. These animals differ from the southern opossum, no less in the texture of the skin than in their colour, indeed, the skin seems to have no texture in it, for it is more like wet tissue paper than skin, which will not bear its own weight. If torn it is too thin to allow of sewing. The natives seem to be fond of

the flesh, and I always return the carcass to them, although purchased to encourage them to bring more." Although these natives wear ornaments they will not take beads unless they are red or white, these seemingly are the favourite colours. The weather was very unsettled at this time, rain fell every day in long and drenching showers, and the scrub showered down water on the party at every step all day long, keeping them in a constant bath. Fresh water was running everywhere and tumbling into the Watelai Channel on both sides. In some places at low tide fresh and good water was running into the channel several feet deep, and 150 yards below where the salt water had been in the morning. On the 4th some large parties of natives were off to the ship before sunrise, for they found that the "Ragah" was off collecting early in the day. Many things were traded for, and amongst others a large iguana, a rat, arrows, shells. Some praus came down the channel later on, on their way to Dobbo, and of course the crews might satisfy their curiosity by boarding the yacht. Writing upon this incident my father says:—"Some of these men who visited us to-day in their large praus had pearls for sale, some had plumes. I could not see anything in their boats they were taking to Dobbo for sale, and they did not appear to be traders as they could not speak a word of Malay, and had a good deal of the Papuan appearance about them. Several wanted to purchase tobacco with silver coins, and all appeared much surprised when I refused money. Some of my crew were on shore this afternoon, and when they returned they said they had seen a full plumaged bird of paradise not far from us. I can scarcely credit it." The weather was gloomy all day, and little rain fell.

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