

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

By His Son, S. A. WHITE, M.B.O.U.

XIV. THE ORNITHOLOGIST AND SAILOR.

Samuel White, writing under Monday, July 5th, states:—

"This morning I started early to try and find the *Paradisea* that was seen yesterday, but did not see a trace of it. Returned in the afternoon wet to the skin as usual; and with four birds only. Andrews as usual secured nothing.

Cockerell went back some distance in the island and struck a piece of good country, where he procured three lovely little kingfishers and two *Paradisca apoda* in full plumage with the exception of the side plumes. The country is so dense in most places that it is impossible to travel through it, and just now water is oozing out everywhere; and although the islands have the appearance of being low throughout, they are really quite hilly in some places, having rather deep ravines in many instances, and so thickly entangled with fallen trees, vines, and other undergrowth, that is impossible to penetrate this thick mass without cutting a way in. The weather to-day has been wet, rain began to fall about 10 a.m., and heavy showers fell all the afternoon. The natives came off in numbers again when they saw me come off to the craft, bringing all sorts of things. I purchased birds, rats, seeds, shields, bows and arrows, reptiles, and many other things. Some natives coming down the Watalli Channel would not part with two plumes for less than 20/ a piece."

The 6th was spent on board the yacht owing to the continuous and heavy rain, all day. Samuel White and his taxidermists occupied their time skinning and curing birds, reptiles, etc., my father doing the bulk of the work as usual. The officers and members of the crew amused themselves mending their clothing and reading. A number of natives came off to the boat, bringing five birds, three plumes, besides numbers of shells and some bananas, all of which were purchased with calico, tobacco, and beads. During the day a large canoe came down from Batuli at the east end of the Watalli Channel. These men wore calico round them, were very clean, but could speak neither Malay nor English. Next morning Samuel White landed with his two collectors. The weather was threatening, but the rain kept off. My father and Cockerell followed a creek which led into the interior of the island of Wokan. There was water in the creek which ran over a bottom of coral and petrified shells, being clear of scrub, formed a rough road. The stream was followed for about four miles, and was found in places to be ankle deep, and in others up to the traveller's waists. At four miles the creek branched off into many small streams, the largest of which was followed for another three miles, when it became so overgrown and choked up with vines and thick scrub, that it had to be left. My father says in his notes:—"Proceeded to a little rising ground, and after a short search we heard *Paradisca apoda*.

We went under a large tree and imitated the bird's call, which sounds like the words 'wark,' 'wark' repeated five or six times in succession. We had not long to wait when a bird in full plume came into the tree and perched on a bough directly over my man's head and commenced dancing in their peculiar fashion, with its golden plumes spread out and waving in the wind, it seemed but an instant and the report of my companion's gun rang out, and the bird was writhing amongst the wet leaves, for it was raining fast. It was a lovely bird with full length of plumes, which were of a deep rich golden orange, tipped with light brown; the bill was blue, and its bright eyes saffron yellow. A broad ring round the base of the bill as far back as the eye was of a deep rich green, and the hair-like feathers stood on end like plush. On the throat and under part of the neck the feathers are short and stiff, and of a rich shining emerald green; the chest is of a deep purplish brown; the under part deep chocolate brown; the top of the head and back of neck, rich straw yellow; the feathers of the head are short and stiff, and stand on end; but lengthen as they proceed down the back of the neck; the back wings and tail are a deep rich chocolate brown; the shafts of the two centre tail feathers are lengthened out beyond the tail to a length of 20 or 30 inches, and are of a wiry nature. This is a glorious bird seen in its native wilds, and this is the first adult *P. apoda* I have seen in the flesh. The chief object of my calling at the Aru's is accomplished, for I have the first great bird of paradise. It is the largest of the genus, and is the size of a crow, measuring $27\frac{1}{2}$ inches from tip to tip of wings, and from tip of bill to the end of short tail feathers, $18\frac{1}{2}$ inches. We secured two other specimens, one a female, which was all chocolate brown. deeper on the head and chest, and is a smaller bird; the other a male, wanting but the side plumes to make it perfect. The birds require to be 8 or 10 years old before they are quite perfect, then they become exceedingly shy. The tree under which we stood happened to be one which the birds select to "dance in." He was attracted by the noise we made, and came to his accustomed place to display his beautiful plumes, and was unconscious of our presence. Several more were heard and looked for, but the rain fell in torrents without ceasing, the sun had been obscured all day, and every rivulet was now swollen to a foaming torrent. The large creek by which we came up was full of muddy water, so we had to take to the scrub, and not being able to see the sun, mistook the bearings and came

out on the west side of the island beyond where Andrews was lost. The beach along the coast is rocky and impassable, and as darkness was coming on we could not think of going through the scrub again, so made up our minds to wait till morning on the shore, but just as light was going a native prau came past on its way to the mouth of the Watalli Channel. We waded out and boarded the native craft. After a long time poling along the coast, on and off reefs, we got near enough to make our people hear us, as the yacht had that day dragged her anchor about two miles down stream. A boat came off and took us on board at midnight. The weather had been excessively wet, the rain poured down continually all day till dark, when it eased up for a short time."

It is only a keen field ornithologist who can enter into the deep feelings which impelled my father to write these notes. Can the reader follow this wonderful field worker wading up a stream past his waist treading over the cruel coral, forcing his way through prickly jungle, rain falling incessantly, soaked to the skin. Then all is forgotten, and he is kneeling amidst the wet fallen leaves of a tropical jungle with a great bird of paradise in his hands; there on the spot he is noting up the colour of the soft parts before they fade in death, not only that, but taking notes of the wonderful lustre of the great bird, and he says in his notes he has accomplished that which brought him to the Aru Islands, and had seen *Paradisea apoda* in all its glory in its native habitat. Taking his precious prize he has to plunge into the jungle, gets off his bearings, and comes out many miles along the coast from the yacht, rain falling all the time; at midnight he is able to change and get food. Not a word of complaint or comment upon the great privation is found in his notes, for he had succeeded in his quest. His must have been indeed a constitution of iron, but he overdid it as the sequel of this short sketch will show. The next day, the 8th, was again wet, so my father and his two collectors remained on board and cured specimens, the owner of the yacht trading with the natives, which thronged the vessel all day. It required no end of time and patience to trade with these men. "No" would be said to one man twenty times or more, yet still he would persist in offering his stuff. My father gave orders to shift the yacht about two miles up stream, and the anchor was dropped just off the end of the island in ten fathoms of water over a rocky bottom. In between the showers during the afternoon Cockerell took the dinghey and pulled on shore

and secured a few parrots. The natives brought off some birds as well as a fine wallaby, which were all traded for. In my father's notes dated the 9th he writes:—"I did not go on shore to-day, but stayed on board to skin some birds and do some writing, but the natives pestered me so much that I could not get on with my work. Anything the natives have to barter the Malays or Macassar men seem to take in hand for them, and prove far more troublesome than the Aru men. I was hours to-day bartering for two birds. Some wanted rice, tobacco, calico, rope, and one man wanted the ship's anchors. Cockerell came on board in the afternoon with some birds, so I went on skinning again. Andrews came off in the evening with nothing as usual. I bartered and traded with the natives to-day for a few insects, besides seeds, shells, animals, etc. Rain fell off and on all day, but the evening is clear." The night was clear and fine, but at daylight rain began to fall. My father ordered a boat out, and landed with Cockerell. They came off to the yacht in the afternoon drenched to the skin, with a few birds. The latter were almost spoilt owing to being unable to dry them during such damp weather, the atmosphere being so charged with moisture. Andrews went on shore during the afternoon, but came off without a single specimen. The natives crowded on board all day. Birds, insects, shells, etc., besides a plume were traded for. It was laughable to see them come on board with all manner of things. One man would have a joint of bamboo filled with worms, centipedes, and such creatures; another a basket full of dead shells picked up from the beach; a boy would have a small basket filled with pieces of basiana leaves, each piece folded and tied up with a piece of split rattan, in each parcel there was a bug, a small beetle, or a spider, a grasshopper, or a cockroach. They brought small birds shot with blunt arrows, strung through the nose with split cane, live birds tied by the legs to a piece of stick by rattan, birds eggs, bows, arrows, spears, and numerous other things. As each man presented his article for trade he would cry "Tombacco" (tobacco) "Mama mama" (heads), or whatever he wished for, but when a plume was offered rupees were asked for, and if by chance they took trade for it, they would take care to receive or demand twenty shillings worth. They seemed to have a set commercial price, and it is like personal estate to them. It still continued raining day and night. On the 11th some notes show that Samuel White served out the week's stores to the cook as usual, then set to

work at his writing. The weather was very wet up to noon, when Cockerell and one of the crew took a boat and pulled over to the other side of the channel, where there was a creek. He brought back a few birds, amongst them a half-plumed "*apoda*". The natives were on board all the afternoon with all kinds of rubbish in leaves. Two birds were bartered for, but several others were so knocked about that they were of no use. The weather in the evening gave indications of clearing up.

In some notes dated the 12th my father writes:—"This morning I had a boat swung out and landed a little way up the channel. I made my way to a large fig tree which was in fruit, where a variety of birds assembled. I stayed till about 2 p.m. and secured 12 birds. Cockerell went over on to Kobror and took two half-plumed *apodas* and two king bird of paradise (*Paradisea regia*). I bartered for a few small birds, besides other things, from the natives, when I returned to the yacht. The weather has been splendid to-day, the sun shone out warmly, and we were enabled to dry sails, clothing, etc. The wind blew fresh from the S.E."

On the 13th all hands remained on board. My father and his two collectors skinning birds and animals all day, the former dealing with the natives as they came on board with specimens. The natives soon found that the "Rajah" had a set price (i.e., a stick of tobacco), for small birds which were shot with blunt arrows, and this gave less trouble. Birds, lizards, shells, seeds, eggs, rats, etc., were secured during the day. The crew listed the yacht and painted her at the water line. The weather was very fine, rather warm in the middle of the day.

On Wednesday, 14th, Samuel White writes:—"This morning I made my way to the fig tree again, and secured several beautiful pigeons. Returned to the yacht, and made preparations for a boat expedition up the Wanumbi Channel taking stores for a fortnight."
