

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

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

XVI. THE ORNITHOLOGIST AND SAILOR.

No great Birds of Paradise came in on Monday, July 26th, but the natives brought along about twenty other birds of several species, a cuscus and several rats. My father and both his taxidermists were now suffering very much from the effects of arsenic and arsenate of potash in the skin curative, "Arsenicál soap." My father always prepared his own soap for this purpose, and made it doubly strong. When this preparation works down under the finger nails and especially the thumb nails, it separates the flesh from the nail, and keeps it in a constant state of festering. Often the irritation reaches three fourths of the distance down the nail, and if the ends of the fingers come in contact with anything hard, it makes one cry out with pain. I have experienced this myself, so it can be understood how the great Naturalist and his assistants suffered when they had to skin and cure hundreds of specimens in a week. The weather was showery during the 26th, little if any wind was perceptible. The next morning Cockrell was sent out with the gun to see what he could get. One

of the crew landed him and came back with the boat. My father and Andrews remained on board to barter with the natives, and cure the specimens, but they had far too much to do for the natives came in with a good number of birds, amongst these some great birds of Paradise, and two "Goby, Goby's" (*Paradisea regia*). The great birds were not all fully plumed, some were young males and others females. Cockrell returned with several birds, one a large Manucode or fruit crow. In some brief notes my father wrote on that day. "The natives have been coming and going all day, and my patience has been put to a severe trial, these fellows are so persistent, and so troublesome, and it will not do to fall out with them, as they may then not come at all, it is amusing to see some of them when they bring a "Buring Matti" (Great Bird of Paradise) for sale."

They know not what to ask, but will sit or stand for the first hour and refuse all offers, then perhaps they will name over a long list of things required, then alter their minds and name over another list, "Sopie," (spirits) often included, thus they remain to my great annoyance blocking up every inch of space to such an extent that we cannot move. I have had too much of them to-day, the skinning room has been full all day, and my dusky visitors have been talking incessantly, and at the top of their voices, making so much noise that we cannot hear ourselves speak. This afternoon a good number of beetles came in, bugs tied up in leaves, caterpillars and bees tied in green leaves, large longicorns with their legs tied up to keep them from running away, or tied in bunches by the antennae!

This evening for the first time a quantity of sweet potatoes was brought on board (about half a bushel), and I purchased them for ten times their value. A man came off this afternoon with two Great Birds of Paradise in such a state of putrefaction that their feathers were falling off them, and these birds are very far gone when the feathers come off, for I have frequently skinned them when they were quite green, and full of maggots, and the skin is exceedingly tough, and the feathers well set. These two birds had been rolled in ashes to absorb the moisture which was coming out through the feathers, and their beautiful plumes were soiled from end to end. The fellow must have kept them a week or more. He was very persistent in asking for guns, and seemed hardly to realise the fact that the birds were useless. He had possibly been out in the scrub for weeks—perhaps covered in

boughs and perched in a tree awaiting for the "Great Birds" to come to feed in the tree, when he would be prepared to shoot them with his bow and arrows. Samuel White writes in his notebook under heading of 28th July:—"We have been skinning all day, but there was a great falling off in the quantity of things brought in by the natives. I skinned nine Birds of Paradise to-day, which were in all stages of plumage from full to no plumes at all. They are chocolate colour of different tints all over, and often quite destitute of plumes. I have gone in to-day for ethnological specimens a good deal.

A variety of things were brought and offered, but everything is very dear, the natives know not how to ask enough. To-morrow I shall go over on the Wokan side to try for some flies, as I think it is a good place." Then again on the 29th he wrote:—"This morning at sunrise I had a boat swung out. Two of the crew with Cockerell and myself started to ascend the creek on the Wokan side of the Watalli Channel. This creek I call Cockerell's creek, because Cockerell was the first of our party who ascended it. I took provision for two days, a fly net, boxes, pins, bottles, etc., but no gun, for I intended giving up all my time to insects and leaving Cockerell to look after the birds. We crossed in the boat, and down the Watalli Channel about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles, when we arrived at the mouth of the creek running in on the Wokan side, it enters in a northerly direction, and winds about for the distance of about a mile, through a densely-wooded and picturesque country, the banks on either side were rocky and thickly covered with beautiful and varied vegetation. It was early morning, and although the day was a cloudy one and the sky threatening the picture around us was very beautiful. The calls of many birds were heard as is usual at early morn in the tropical scrubs and forests, and amongst others we heard the loud "Wark, Wark" of the Great Bird of Paradise.

After we had rowed about a mile in this creek in salt water, our progress was suddenly ended by a huge reef across the creek, about four feet out of high water, here the salt-water ceased, and fresh water runs into it during rains. We now left the boat which I sent off to the yacht, with orders to meet us in the morning of the next day at the same place. My companion and I walked up the creek for about four miles, through fresh water varying in depth from ankle deep to up to our waists. The bottom of the creek for the whole distance is bare rock (Coraline limestone) the water had ceased

to flow, or almost so, and it lay in long pools varying in depth from a few inches to three or four feet. After wading up the creek for about four miles we were nearly at its source in the centre of the island of Wokan. The land although very undulating, rough and rugged is very low, the only rises I could perceive as we walked up the creek, being a few ledges of rock over which the rain water tumbles and there rises averaged about a foot high, and occurred several times in a mile. The bottom of the creek was bare rock, without mud or sand. At the source of the creek is a native plantation, where they have made a partial clearing, and were growing a variety of plants for food. It was here I was expecting to find numbers of insects, and long before we reached the spot rain began to fall, and continued at short intervals all day. It was a poor day for anything, and I only captured about a dozen flies, besides a few beetles.

As the weather was so wet we decided not to stay the night, but to return to the village a little below where we entered the creek and try to get a canoe to take us off to the Yacht, as I had told the men not to come off for us till next day. Cockerell shot a few good birds. Little could be done in the wet, and I could take more flies in Australia in an hour than here in a day. On our return I captured several interesting flies, and Cockerell procured several beautiful little Kingfishers, with bright-blue backs and yellow breasts.

Upon arriving at the village which is composed of one large house, it was not difficult to persuade one of the men to take us in his canoe to the Yacht, and be it said to the credit of the natives generally, that they were always willing to render me assistance of this kind when I have been benighted or astray among them. They of course always expected to be rewarded with a little tobacco or some other thing, and I never failed to pay them liberally. We reached the yacht wet and cold about dark, and I was glad I had returned as there were no less than eleven Birds of Paradise to be purchased, these were not all plumed of course, but a fair proportion had plumes, to barter for all these kept me vigorously at work till just on midnight, the guns were all gone, but the breech loaders, and these had to be shown to prove there was not a muzzle loader left, then the birds had to be purchased with a variety of things such as powder, shot, beads, axes, knives, calico, handkerchiefs, iron wire, and sovereigns such bartering I never experienced before. The trading will begin by asking for tens or fives of everything, and reduce the

numbers as business progresses, during all this time the cabin of my little craft is filled with men so full that no one can move, the heat is very oppressive, all talking at once and at the top of their voices. This goes on hour after hour, and after I have had a fatiguing day's walk in a tropical scrub, it requires all the patience I possess to keep me from losing my temper; but I am determined not to show anger at any trifling annoyance; as these people do not mean to be offensive.

So this evening I concluded our bargains, and we parted if not quietly (for these people are excessively boisterous) we did so with satisfaction on both sides. A number of things were purchased such as, birds, insects, shells, baskets, implements; etc. A young cassowary that was offered I could not buy as the owner would be satisfied with nothing but "Sopie" (Grog). I am frequently asked for spirits, but I do not mean that they shall have a drop of it, as it is a useless and dangerous luxury that they can well do without. I have suffered exceedingly all day to-day with chafed flesh. It frequently happens that persons in these warm climates have their flesh break out into a rash, prickly heat; etc, especially in the over-heated parts, such as under the arms, round the waist, inside the thighs, etc. Mine seems on the inside of the thighs, and the desire to scratch is irresistible, and our hands being continually in arsenic the skin may have become poisoned. However my flesh has broken out into festering sores. I am not the only one, for those who have to go out and do as I do are as bad, and the wet to-day and chafe of our wet clothing has made Cockerell and myself perfectly raw, and it is with difficulty we can get about, indeed if it gets much worse we will be laid up.

The next day the 30th, my father remained on board all day for he and his two taxidermists were very busy curing specimens. Several Birds of Paradise were brought on board, and many other birds and natural history specimens were bartered for, but my father seems to have been suffering very acutely with his flesh sores aggravated so by his wet trip inland.

In a very brief note written on that day by my father he says:—"About 10 o'clock this morning a Macassar man came with a Bird of Paradise and is here still (midnight) he expected a gun for it, but my muzzle-loading guns are all gone, and the fellow cannot realize the fact. The day has passed as usual—crowds of natives filled the ship. I have not been too tolerant with them to-day. I have been been a good deal

out of temper, having suffered all night, and to-day very much with my sores, the wetting yesterday has not done them any good. Rain has been falling all day." The man referred to in the above note remained on till the morning when my father tried all kinds of ways to get rid of him or purchase the bird, but to no purpose the fellow wanted a gun and was fearfully disappointed about not getting one, as last when he found that the owner was leaving his ship he accepted a sovereign and a variety of other things. These other Malays are the worst class of men to deal with for they will remain or come back day after day and renew their bartering. The Aru men are quite bad enough in their persistent ways, but the Macassar and Malay men are far worse. As soon as my father got rid of all the natives on board he ordered out the big boat and a crew, and made up the Watalli Channel, a light breeze sprang up, and a sail was hoisted, but after a mile or so it died away and they resumed pulling, which was continued for four hours and arrived within a few miles of the end of the channel. When the tide changed and became too strong, and he had to turn back owing to the wet, and not having a tent with them. In some notes written some time afterwards, my father says: "The channel did not turn suddenly to the north-west as I expected it might, but kept in an easterly and north-easterly direction, the bends were not excessive although not straight anywhere.

After we left the yacht a few miles behind, the channel became a little narrower, (about 400 yards in the narrowest place). The scenery was exceedingly beautiful as we passed along, the channel looked like a broad and noble river, the tide-like stream running at the rate of two or three miles an hour. The banks in some places were perpendicular rock, and in others low and muddy, the land on either side was low, very uneven, indeed rugged, and densely clothed with luxurious vegetation of many species, amongst it here and there a cocoanut struggled through and showed its head amongst the rest of the vegetation. The very edge of the cliff grew thick scrub, and trees at times grew on the bare face of the cliff, spreading their roots and grasping every inequality of surface or every hole in the rock. During the first four miles we passed about a dozen houses of the natives, generally not more than one at one spot placed on the points of land that jut out into the water here and there, and where the soil on the rock is a little deeper than usual, here the natives half clear the land, and plant their food stuffs, the houses are built in

the usual way on piles, thatched with palm leaves, and the sides formed with mats. One man was building a new house alongside the old one, it was not very extensive, but must have been nearly 30 feet long, it had two raised floors, which were about seven feet apart, the first floor being about that distance from the ground. We passed many tributaries to the Watalli Channel like the Wanumbi creek, but most were shallow and shot off from the main stream on either side. Although I did not reach as far as I desired I was gratified and much pleased with the scenery, I consider it extremely beautiful, and am sure if it were within reach of civilized parts of the world it would be much frequented. In many places we observed fresh water falling over rocky banks into the salt water of the channel at such places we frequently landed after an hour of so's pull in the sun (as the sun shone out very warm between the showers), and my men refreshed themselves with cool clear water, which comes from the dark dense tropical scrub and falls in cascades into rocky basins before it finally mingles with the water of the ocean.

We reached the yacht before dark, and I felt as though I had ended a good days work, but far worse than all the work are the sores that are increasing both in size and number in places about my body. When warm and the perspiration is running, the horrible itching and smarting at times seems almost as much as I can endure, several times to-day I have been on the point of jumping overboard to wash away the perspiration, but am afraid the salt water may aggravate the wounds. There were a great many natives on board when I got back, but they bring but little now. The weather to-day has been very disagreeable, being both hot and wet."

August 1st, my father gave orders to have the yacht shifted with the ebb tide, and at ten o'clock she was under way, and came out of the Watalli Channel. There were several natives on board when the anchor was heaved, one had a live Bird of Paradise tied by the leg to a stick, it was a fine bird, five or six years old, perfect all but the side plumes, these were only a few inches long, and of a very dull straw colour. The poor bird fluttered, bit, and screamed, the owner refused several axes for it, and took it away as the yacht got under way, he either did not know what he wanted for it, or could not explain. My father, writing under the above date, says: "We came out of the channel with both the wind and tide, and were soon in the big open bay at the mouth of the Watalli Channel, here I intended dropping anchor, but I was busy be-

long, and the Captain disobeyed my orders in not calling me. He went on to the north-west point of the bay, I fear it is too far to return, or I would have liked to settle the doubt as to there being a passage for a boat from the Watalli Channel to the village of Maykor, but I think it very doubtful. We dropped anchor early in the afternoon, and most of the men went on shore. The weather was much finer than yesterday."