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

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

XVIII. THE ORNITHOLOGIST AND SAILOR.

In notes dated the 24th August my father writes:—

"To-day the men have been off cutting firewood. I went up to see Mr. Jardine and ascertained that one of his boats was going to Thursday Island to meet a steamer on her way to Sydney. This offered me an opportunity to write, so I came off to the yacht to do so. Weather very squally and the wind very strong at times. The 26th. Spent the morning with Mr. Jardine. He has kindly undertaken to take care of my craft if I wish to leave her for any time, and also to have a sheet of copper put all round her to secure her from marine insects. In the afternoon I set a couple of the men to clear out the port store room in order to get out a cask of meat; I then went on shore. Cockerell has gone off into the bush to stay a day or two. The weather has been moderately clear and

without rain, but the wind is still blowing hard. 26th: To-day I packed up many specimens, birds, and shells and spent the evening with Mr. Jardine. The weather is milder, but the wind is still strong and sky clear."

On Friday, 27th, my father seems to have had more trouble with his captain, and he ordered the anchor up, and made sail for Thursday Island, which was reached in a few hours. In company of Captain Pennefather, Samuel White went to the Senior Magistrate, and it was arranged that the captain and crew would come before the Bench next day. In a few notes written on the day my father says:—

"At the invitation of Captain Pennefather I went on board the Government Schooner 'Pearl.' This schooner is owned and kept by the Queensland Government, and has only recently been put into commission; she has been until recently the survey ship owned partly by the British Government after the manner of all the colonial survey ships. About a year ago she was in the market, and I was nearly purchasing her, but an unavoidable delay proved fatal. She is a schooner of about 50 tons measurement, carries two six pounder Armstrong guns, and appears to have a large native crew on board; she is kept for the regulation of the pearl fisheries, the settling of disputes, and a little exploring between times."

The next morning my father breakfasted with the Captain of the "Pearl,", then appeared against his crew, who were sent down to Sydney. He seems to have let a Mr. Robb have all his ship stores, intending to get fresh supplies when he returned. There were some things which had to go into bond. It seems that the weather was so rough that nothing could be landed from the yacht, and Samuel White passed most of his time on his craft at anchor. On September 1st he writes:— "Spent most of the day on board; went to see Mr. Robb and arranged with him to store all my stuff. He will come himself and take it from the ship, put what he does not want into bond, and make use of the remainder for himself. Capt. Pennefather came on board, and I lent him my big swivel gun, and gave him a bag of shot and a bag of wads. I do not think I will get away this week." It seems that the yacht and owner remained in the same spot for another week. He could not get rid of his stores, so sold flour, sugar, rice, biscuits, rum, brandy, ale, beef, etc., etc., for £25, which cost £200, and the rest of stores were put into bond. Then he arranged with Mr. Jardine to send his men over to Thursday Island and take the yacht over to Cape York to be laid up. On the 15th Samuel White and his two taxidermists were

still waiting for the crew from Cape York to shift the yacht, and under the date my father writes:—"This morning I nailed down some boxes of specimens, and found that some of the boxes had been opened, and many of the specimens removed, and upon examination I found some one had been in my cabin, and taken most of my tortoiseshell and all my pearls. Thus I have been robbed by my crew from the time I started till they left me."

On the 26th of September Samuel White, with one taxidermist (Cockerell) boarded the Somerset bound down the coast, and the yacht was to sail for Cape York that day to be under the care of Mr. Jardine. Samuel White joined his wife in Sydney, and had only been there a few days when on the very day he arranged to purchase a home on north shore for his wife and family while he was away to finish his expedition, he caught a chill, inflammation set in, and on November 17th, 1880 there passed away one of (if not) the greatest field ornithologist the world has ever seen. He possessed a most kindly and loveable disposition, by far too good natured. He was a great musician, chemist, photographer, intrepid explorer, a keen soldier, a sailor as this brief sketch shows, but above all and in every sense of the word a Man.

Among my father's papers were some notes evidently written upon his last voyage from Thursday Island to Sydney; they were very brief, pointing to the fact that he intended enlarging upon them at a later date. The first notes deal with the islands on which my father collected the birds, he says:—"The Aru Islands consist of a great number of islands of all sizes. The largest are divided from each other by narrow channels holding salt water, and appear no more than rivers, or such was the appearance of those I was in. The names of the principal are Tragan on the south, Kobror, Maykor, Wokan, and Wamma. The last named is much the smallest, and most northerly, but is notable as containing the old trading village of "Dobbo", and is situated at the northern end of the group, which extends from north to south for about 100 miles. The islands are variously laid down and divided in different charts, and I believe the two admiralty charts that I have are quite wrong so far as they apply to the parts I have visited. Wallace's Chart at page 442 of his "Malay Archipelego" is by far the most correct, indeed had it not been for this map I should have been a long time finding the Watalli Channel, had I been in it I should not have known it by the Admiralty Charts, for it is quite absent from them. The land everywhere is very low and even swampy at this

time of the year. There is not one mountain in all the Arus. Had there been a hill of any size it could have been easily seen from the sea-ward. Tragan is the highest and most undulating, grassy patches of large extent can be seen along the west coast. The islands are composed of soft white stone which looks like limestone, in many parts quite bare, in others covered in black mud or mould, but not to any great depth, and of a vegetable nature, and very rich. Consequently there are no water wells, but water was running or lying everywhere. All along the west coast from end to end there was a good anchorage at this time of the year quite close in shore for a vessel drawing from 10 to 15 feet. The most southern of my anchorages was at the south end of Tragan; from this we dropped anchor in places all along and beyond the island of "Polo Babi"; first a quarter of a mile from shore in four fathoms, next a mile from shore in seven fathoms; then a few hundreds of yards from shore in three and a half fathoms. Again at the village of Maykor a quarter of a mile from shore there was four fathoms, and at half a mile there was 15 fathoms. All through the Watalli Channel we bottomed at seven to sixteen fathoms. Along the coast the bottom was rock and sand, and in the channel it was bare soft rock, over which the chain rumbled when the tide changed; in one or two places soft mud was found. The beach all along the west coast was either sand or rock. Where sand occurred it was merely a bank covered with low dense vegetation, when over this, a low wet country begins, covered with dense tropical forest. A good deal of rock occurs along the shores of the bay, into which the Watalli Channel enters, and for want of a proper name I called it "Polo Babi Bay". Here the banks are not high, and once over them a low wet scrub is entered, wet at this time of the year, for rain falls nearly every day; but when a fine day or two comes along there is a great diminution in stream and pool, so that I have no doubt that in the drier part of the season the scrubs are quite dry and water scarce, but in July and August the climate is cool and moist, with abundance of water everywhere. There are no rivers, only small creeks, and then not deep, excepting when the salt water flows up them, and these are fringed with mangrove swamps. It was a great wonder to me that there were not more mosquitoes. They did not trouble us very much on board, only in the scrubs, and then not so badly as I have experienced them in many parts of Australia. Possibly they would be more troublesome from December to March.

"The people of the Arus who assisted me in collecting birds, especially the Great Bird of Paradise, are without doubt the most mixed of human beings. I had not the time to study these mixed races, but they appeared to be on the whole well made muscular men, especially those from the 'Blackangtanna' (bark country). They were taller and longer limbed men, with a greater number of beads and other ornaments about them, and a greater number of frizzly heads. They evidently had more of the Papuan blood in them. The Aru people are not black. Many are a pale brown, others somewhat darker. Many who lived on the Wataili Channel and in the interior had their hair cut short, while others wore it long and frizzly standing out all round, making a man's head the size of a half bushel measure! In some there seemed to be a slight skin disease, and some had their hands and spots about their bodies white, or spotted white and black; they did not appear dirty, but the big mop of hair in some instances was in a disgusting state. I saw some men with long frizzly hair tied up in a bunch on top or at the back of the head, which, I thought gave them a very feminine appearance, especially as little hair grew on their faces. Some old men were seen with short stubbly beards, but the majority had little or no beard. I noticed several men who had one or more moles or spots on various parts of their faces, out of each mole grew several hairs; these seemed to be cultivated till they had reached several inches in length, this being the only hair upon their faces. Most of the men go nearly naked, having nothing to cover them but a long narrow strip of coloured calico round the waist and brought up between the thighs. The Malay or Macassar men are mostly draped in loose folds of calico. There is a great difference in character also between the Malay and the Aru men. The former is diffident, docile, and not given to talking, shows little expression on his face, rarely smiles; indeed some look so solemn that one would think it were a serious thing to live. The Aru men are the contrary, for they are talkative, even boisterous and impulsive, they will sing to themselves, and always chant a song while paddling often to the music of a tom tom or a gong, they thronged the yacht all day long, packed themselves as closely as they could stand, and would not move for anyone to pass until their toes were trodden upon. They pulled everything about, and watched with attention everything that was going on. At meals every mouthful and every movement was taken note of, much to the annoyance of my father, officers and crew; they all talked at once and incessantly as loud as they

could yelp, hoot and yell at each other till nothing else can be heard, but their greatest redeeming quality is honesty. Although this crowding went on for weeks, and many things lying about which must have been a great temptation, yet nothing was missed but a hand lead and line which some of the crew accused the natives of taking, but I am confident they did not take it, and thought I heard it fall into the water. They did not take a pin or a piece of paper without asking for it. They are as a whole strictly honest, and although they are but savages they are a pattern for their more enlightened brothers. A good many of the Aru men speak Malay so that I was able to get along with them very well as I learnt a good deal of the Aru language as well. One could not say that they are industrious, although they work plantations, but like all savages are idle, their greatest pleasure being chewing and talking. They chew "Beetel Nut" lime and green leaves sometimes mixed with a little tobacco if they can get it, and carry this chewing to a great excess. I am afraid they would be great drinkers if they could get it, as I have been asked for "Sopi" (spirit) hundreds of times. Some men have refused everything else in exchange for birds, but I hardly ever indulged them, without it be a chief, and never in exchange for anything else. Their homes are good passable structures, always built on piles raised from the ground five or six feet, have a split bamboo floor, and an opening through the centre as an entrance. The sides are usually of mats, and the roof thatched with palm leaves. The only ornaments seen in the houses were trophies of the chase, such as cassowaries' feathers and bones, fish tails, bird feathers, etc. The utensils for preparing food and holding water, etc., were rough clay pots. Some with very wide mouths in shape much like the old three legged iron pot; in these they boil their food. Gaudy coloured plates and basins were seen, but these came from Dobbo. Many families had a copper or brass gong. Some of the houses are large, being 30 feet long, and several families dwell in them. The villages are small, consisting of one to three or four houses, scattered anywhere from the coast to the interior. Their plantations are all well fenced with spars laid on their sides about two inches apart, and three or four feet high; this is to keep wild pigs out. In many places they construct pig traps by making little shoots or leads with stakes driven into the ground and a cross piece lashed along the top with rattan, the lead is about five or six yards at the entrance, and about a foot or less at the other end. A pig on the outside would if tempted by the green

vegetables inside easily find his way in at the wide end of the lead, and when once inside would not find the small opening to return. For these plantations a piece of land is selected which had more than ordinary depth of soil, it is of course in the midst of a dense tropical scrub. The land is partially cleared by cutting down most of the trees and leaving them lying on the ground to decay away. The crop is then put in the virgin soil among this labyrinth of tree trunks and grows luxuriently, it consists of sweet potatoes, yams, sugar cane, etc., and sometimes, not always, bananas. The cocoanut grows anywhere without clearing for it, but this tree requires from five to ten years to come into full bearing. At the time Wallace visited the Aru Islands cocoanuts were not known, but there are a great many full grown trees now. The natives do not care to part with the nuts; they ask an enormous price for them, or indeed for any of their products. Bananas are as dear if not more so than in Australia. I have seen several kinds of bananas growing in the plantations when out in search of birds. The milk of the young cocoanut forms a delicious and wholesome drink, but it is not often one can indulge oneself in the Aru Islands. Besides their vegetable foods the natives obtain large quantities of fish. They catch them in small nets, but more frequently by spearing them at night by torch light. Then the men and boys are good archers, and shoot numbers of birds, now and again a wallaby, and upon rare occasions a pig; they also snare the terrestial birds as well as mammals. The men and boys always have bows and arrows with them. When rambling through the bush I have on several occasions not known my exact whereabouts. This is very easily managed when the sun is so often obscured by heavy clouds, and every yard of that country is dense bush. Coming suddenly upon a village or hut I would ask one of the men to put me in the right direction; that he would do without a moment's hesitation, and if he only had to go twenty yards he woud bring his bow and arrows and mat. This mat is an extremely useful article; it is made of the leaves of the pandanus palm, neatly sewn together three or four thick, it is about four feet by three, is doubled once, and the end sewn up so that it is like a sack with the top and one side open. This mat then forms the men's seat or bed, it is very soft, should it rain he can open it out and put it over his head, when it will cover the head, shoulders, and back, and no rain will go through it, if it is cold he does the same, or if the sun shines too hotly he can make an umbrella of it. The boys shoot well with their arrows,

and brought dozens of birds to me which had been shot with blunt headed arrows. Have frequently tried their skill. They will hit a biscuit at twenty yards almost every shot. The natives are fond of shooting with a gun also, but they rarely can get ammunition. Some of them have old flint muskets. They were awestricken when the breach-loaders were first shown them. While at Wanumbi they would not leave the guns alone. As soon as they were put down one of the natives had them and was pulling them about showing and explaining to the rest; often I had to send my fifty guinea gun off to the yacht as it was not safe to allow such inexperienced people to handle it.