

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

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

XVII. THE ORNITHOLOGIST AND SAILOR.

Monday, the 2nd of August the yacht remained at anchor, and my father spent the morning packing away many of his specimens, and clearing up his specimen room and cabin. In a

few notes he says: "It seems strange after the last few weeks of rush and bustle to have a little time to myself, and I now find time to have a good clean up and put things away. I think my sores are better after a day's quiet." Andrews went off in the morning with a gun, and Cockerell left in the afternoon, but neither of these collectors put in an appearance at dark, and were given over as bushed. About 11 p.m. Cockerell turned up after a very rough time in the scrub. Andrews was out all night and nearly all the next day. My father set out in search of him, and at length he located the missing man's whereabouts by firing his gun several times and awaiting Andrew's answering shot. Samuel White in his note book makes the following comment: "Andrews out all night, had to go after him. He must have had a lively time of it as the mosquitos are very troublesome in this part of the island. This is the second time within a few days that my taxidermists have lost themselves. This corner of the island seems to be a quiet spot, no natives living here, and there are no cocoanut palms to be seen, consequently a few great Birds of Paradise live here in quietude, and their calls could be heard from the yacht. As soon as I got Andrews on board and saw that he had some nourishing food after his wet and rough time in the tropical scrub, I took Cockerell, ordered a boat out, and landed a little distance up the coast. We went in search of the great bird, and we were successful in securing three fine specimens. I had a good opportunity of watching these beautiful birds to-day, and I still find that their actions resemble those of the Rifle Bird of Australia. Some of them clung to the branches of the tree in which they were dancing, with their backs downwards, stretching their wings, and waving their plumes, and giving forth their loud cry of wark, wark, repeated several times. I was unable to stay out very long owing to my sores giving me much pain when I walked, and the country is full of 'Lawyer Palm', which makes travelling very difficult under any circumstances. While out after Andrews to-day I observed more palms than usual, some of them very tall and slender, perhaps 70 feet high and not more than six inches in diameter, being but a trifle larger at the lower end, than near the top. I saw a good many cycads, which were like those growing in Australia. The country here as elsewhere is low, and in many places the soil is very shallow, notwithstanding which there are some very large, and tall trees growing at frequent intervals. Birds were not numerous, except the 'Great Bird' and a large rail, but

the latter is shy, and as it runs on the ground and amongst the undergrowth it is difficult to obtain; the natives sometimes snare them. The 'Great Bird' is the shyest of them all. If a stick is cracked, or the slightest noise be made whilst approaching him he is off in an instant. As we lie here at anchor a corner of the island lies to the south of us, the Watalli Channel to the east, the little round island of "Polo Baby" (Pig Island) to the north, and the open sea to the west. Northward from Polo Baby lies the Island of "Wamma", on which is situated the town of 'Dobo', a very old trading port for the Malay and Macassar men, and distant about twelve miles. I will not visit Dobo this time as there is nothing to interest me more than I have already-seen. I have been very troubled of late with the master and crew, and have determined to return to Australia and fit out with fresh Officers and crew." This is the first time that my father mentions the trouble with his officers and crew, but he had been suffering a great disappointment for many days, and had to put up with a great deal of insolence from the master. The weather was still showery as usual. On Wednesday 4th, the anchor was heaved, and Samuel White gave instructions to the master to make along the west coast of the Aru's and fetch up at the south end of the Island of Trangan. The wind was very light and weather finer than usual. The yacht kept on her course all night, but the wind being light she made very little headway. About nine next morning the wind freshened, and about 11 a.m. the vessel came to anchor off the west shore of Trangan. Some of the natives were soon off, and the crew with one officer went on shore with the big boat to cut and bring off firewood. Samuel White seems to have stayed on board, as he was very distrustful of his crew, and his suspicions were well founded as subsequent events will show. The next day the crew were busy bringing off wood. Cockrell went on shore and returned with a few birds, amongst them two beautiful little King Birds of Paradise. My father seems to have found it hard to make up his mind to return when there was so much work in front of him; he paced the deck nearly all that night, and seems to have made up his mind, for I have found the following notes written on Saturday 7th of August: "I gave orders this morning to trim ship by putting some of the stores in the skinning room aft, stowing away firewood, and had some spare cable-chains shifted aft. I am afraid the master will drop to my move, and guess that I intend to return, I have not told him of my determination yet. A number of natives came off this morning to sell their

stuff. I purchased platted and coloured mats, cocoanuts, fish, and many other things, like the rest of Aru's things they are very dear. I had to give a flat cake of tobacco for every four nuts, one cake of tobacco for three small fish. The men who came on board to-day had a very feminine appearance, both in features, and the way they dressed their hair. Many of them tied up their hair in a bunch behind, and adorned it with beads, and wore ear-rings. As soon as all was clear and straight I gave orders to get the anchor up, and then gave the master his course, and told him to keep on the one course till such times as I gave orders to alter it. I wonder if he guesses that I am returning, but I am determined to return and refit, and reman my vessel before visiting New Guinea. I find that my officers, crew, and staff are altogether unfit for this kind of work. The master is especially a beastly fellow, and quite unfit for his position: At dark we were still in sight of the island we had left at mid-day, for the wind was very light. So the land of the Aru's and 600 miles of a nasty choppy sea between us and Australia, thus for a time (it was the last), and once again I must bid farewell to the land of the "Burong Mattee" (Great Bird of Paradise), and the "Gooby Gooby" (King Bird of Paradise), an out of the way corner of the earth that few Europeans ever visit. I know of only three Englishmen who have ever been there. They are all "Cranky bird or bug hunters." In this land some of the most singular and beautiful of God's creatures live and die amongst a wonderful tropical scrub. My stay has been short, and the first voyage will terminate much sooner than I anticipated, for I intended to have been out two years at least. I am determined to re-fit, for I cannot put up with insolence and bad manners on my own boat. The collecting in the islands has exceeded all my expectations, and had I gone the route and time I expected, and had been as successful all the way my collection would have been a very large one. As it is I have a nice little collection of birds, about 800 to 1,000, besides other things. A list of the birds I will make out when I have had time and an opportunity to compare and examine them." It seems that my father gave the sailing master his course, but upon going on deck before morning he found the yacht heading for the New Guinea coast. An encounter followed, of which I have no record, but from that time on Samuel White mostly steered the ship himself, and watched day and night, a strain in fearfully bad weather which was encountered, and there is no doubt all that upon a man who had over-worked himself in a tropical country, was

the shortening of his life. My father took a greater command over the yacht, and he set her course south, and day after day battled through a heavy sea, and the owner of the ship kept her on her course for hours drenched to the skin. He put few, if any, complaints on paper, but seems to have written a few notes at odd moments, and these I will give as they are written from day to day.

Sunday, 8th. "Since yesterday the wind has been changeable. We have been making between three and four knots, although I have had the craft close hawled. My watch on deck is almost continuous now, I cannot trust anyone. If the weather keeps as it is now I will keep the vessel on this (starboard) tack for about a week, and if she still steers south will bring about the Coburg Peninsula, then lay along the coast of Australia to Cape York. The glass is falling, and the weather looks like changing. Monday, 9th. Since yesterday the weather has kept dull and threatening. I am having continual trouble with my officers and crew. There have been numbers of birds about us, although we are hundreds of miles from land. This morning there were several tropic birds round the ship, and all the morning thousands of flying fish were rising out of our course. There seems to be two species of them, one a much larger one than the other, and they are not seen together. This morning I discovered that there were bugs in my cabin, some of the beautiful crew forward had brought a stock on board at Sydney, and they have now found their way aft. I have lived most of my life amongst vermin in the bush, but I am sure if I had flies, mosquitoes, ants, sandflies, leaches, spiders, centipedes, scorpions, snakes, and a thousand other pests found in the bush, and put them all together they are not a tenth part as bad as that disgusting pest. I find a white crew can be in every way as dirty and treacherous as a black one." A few notes written by my father, and which I fancy were made on the 10th simply say: "A heavy wind came up last night, and we have been plunging into a terrific sea. There is not a dry spot on deck, and it is impossible to keep dry. The continual watching and exposure is making it hard for me. While at the islands I did not use a coat, but now I have warm clothing and an oilskin overall, but cannot keep dry or warm. Wednesday, 11th. Last night I went aloft and saw a red glow which I fancy was from a bush fire on the Australian coast. I put the yacht about, but at sunrise there was no land in sight. A nasty heavy sea is running, and we are taking it at a bad angle, which causes much water to come on board. I

am standing on the starboard tack again to-night. 12th. Had to face off to the west last night owing to the heavy seas, and to-day we are beating up to the east. At daylight this morning the sea looked angry and black; the sun rose through a heavy bank of clouds. We are making heavy work of it to-day. 13th. Had to put the yacht about several times last night, but have her on the port tack, and will keep her there if possible to cross the Gulf of Carpentaria. The wind has gone more to the south, and the sea is not so high, still a nasty short one is worse. I had frequent soundings taken during the day, and the bottom of the ocean is very uneven, for at some castings of the lead only five fathoms of water shown, while at the next cast no bottom could be touched. 14th. Have been running into a heavy head sea all night and to-day, and I will be glad to get over to the east side of the gulf. I am having much trouble with my crew to make them obey orders. A large waterspout was seen to-day not very distant from the ship. The wind is blowing strongly again, and I have had to reduce the sail again. 15th. I changed the course again at eight bells this morning. My little vessel was making hard and dirty work of it, for terrific squalls accompanied by rain burst over us very frequently, and with a heavy sea made the craft plunge a great deal. 16th. We had a bad night; the yacht was thrashed with wind and rain, and dowsed with heavy seas all night. I have lost all confidence in my officers and men, and have to remain almost continually on deck. I have been drenched for days now, first with fresh water, and the next five minutes with salt. I will be glad to get to Cape York, when I can have a rest and straighten these fellows up. A heavy sea carried one of the boats off the davits, but fortunately it hung by the painter, and we were able to get it on board again with only the loss of the side-benches. The seas are running very high to-night. 18th. The sea is running high still, and wind blowing hard, this makes thirteen days of very dirty weather. No land in sight. I will be glad when the strain is over. 19th. The wind went down towards morning, and the sea moderated some, but at daylight rose again, and the sea regained its former height. In spite of the weather birds have been with us all through the voyage. Last night a little black backed tern came and sat on the skylight close to me while I was at the wheel, and allowed me to put my hand on it, for it was exhausted with battling against the wind and sea. Several little companies of tropic birds have been seen at different times. A day or so ago I saw an unfortunate white-

faced heron trying to alight on the vessel, but the wind blew so hard that after several attempts, and every time he blew to leeward and had to beat up again, then he went off with the wind, and if he ever made land would be an emigrant to the Aru Islands. 20th. Wind and sea went down somewhat this morning, and I was glad of the rest for I took a little sleep. My position shows me at noon to-day to be nine miles to the leeward of Booby Island, so put about on the other tack. My officers and crew are playing cards all day, and I have a job to keep any kind of discipline on board, and have ordered the watch on deck myself more than once. To-day a white tern came on board and sat close to me. I put my hand on it, and it flew off, and it soon returned and sat about the deck for hours, then seemed rested and flew off. I took it up once and found its body very thin and wasted like the others I had captured on board, and appeared as if they had been out for weeks at sea. 21st. The wind and sea got up again last night, but moderated again at noon. I find that I am out of my reckoning, and have grave suspicions that the chronometer has been interfered with. The ship was put about, and at 4 o'clock this afternoon Prince of Wales Island was some distance to windward, and at dark I ordered an anchor to be let go. I felt anxious not knowing our exact position and knowing that several reefs are situated around us I had a man stationed forward all the night, but nothing was seen. I smelt smoke distinctly, and believe it came from Prince of Wales Group. 22nd. Lifted the anchor and stood for a few hours towards Red Wallace Island, which was in sight, then tacked in towards the strait, when the wind fell and a strong tide set in, so I had an anchor let go. 23rd. This morning at daylight we got under way and beat through Endeavour Straits with a strong head wind until we reached York Island, and here anchored in six fathoms of water till the tide changed, which did not take place until 4 o'clock, when the wind rose and blew very hard. Weighed anchor and beat up to Albany and dropped anchor a little after sunset. Thus prematurely ends the first part of my expedition after five months' hard sailing, and an expenditure of £5,000. Out of this I have had about four or five weeks collecting, with one man besides myself. What my crew will do or what I will do with them I am now making up my mind, but what ever happens they will find a rigid discipline and control put upon them. A short time after anchoring Mr. Jardine kindly sent off the letters and papers addressed to the yacht.