

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

BY HIS SON, S. A. WHITE.

### I.—THE ORNITHOLOGIST.

Samuel White came to South Australia with his brother William when they were small boys in 1842; their father, John White, having arrived in the Colony some few years before them in the *Tam O'Shanter* in 1836, and taken up country at the Reedbeds. At that time much of the property was covered in a dense mass of reeds and flags, outside of which was a fringe of high dense rushes and luxuriant grasses. This, combined with belts along the river of fine timber, red gum (*Eucalyptus rostrata*) and sandhills not far off, covered with pines and banksia, and out beyond that open plains and marsh land, made a rich and diversified collecting ground, which has to-day practically passed away owing to the advance of civilization. The young Whites must have been naturally fond of nature, and ornithology began to work its charm over the elder brother's (Samuel) mind. Amidst this rich piece of country in its virgin state he had a great field for his abilities and tastes. Labour in those days was at a premium; in fact it could not be had, and the brothers, Samuel and William, were often sent to watch the cattle. This was a difficult job, for the country was covered with high rushes and reeds, and it was necessary for the watchers to climb into a tree or sit upon a stump to get a good view of the country around. During (what would be to some) long hours of watching the two boys became expert bird observers, and knew the habits of the birds by heart, for they were being taught from Nature's book. Now an employe of their father's had a great turn for natural history. His chief employment was that of a blacksmith; he could skin and stuff birds, and as can be imagined, the two lads were willing pupils. Whenever a chance offered they were round the blacksmith's shop. About this time the father began to notice the liking for nature developing in the two brothers, and he put a strong check on it, as he considered they wasted too much of their time, so the lads had to carry on their collecting and bird observing on the quiet. They had come into possession of a muzzle loading pistol, and this enabled them to procure more specimens, but the firearm

and the specimens had to be hidden far away from the house in a large hollow tree, a hiding place known only to themselves. The surviving brother, William, told me, that one day he was working by himself and had hung his coat on an old stump of a tree, and that a little Brown Flycatcher (*Microeca fascinans*), after his way, came making a great fuss at the unusual object of a coat, and soon this noise attracted a Flame-breasted Robin (*Littlera chrysoptera phoenicea*). William took up a stone or stick and knocked it over. The perpetrator of the deed, who is close on eighty years now, says he can remember as if it were yesterday how overcome by emotion he was at handling the first robin of the species, and said that day seemed as if it would never end, when he could take it to his brother, Samuel, that he might stuff it. At last this was accomplished, and the beautiful robin was added to their growing collection. This last addition had such a fascination for them that they could not help but look at it several times in the day. It may be this that roused the father's suspicions, and he at last detected the first museum in the hollow tree, and complete destruction followed. This was a sad blow, and on top of this their friend the blacksmith moved two or three miles nearer town. The lads were never daunted. The great love of so glorious a natural science had developed a brain power that could not be balked, and on Sundays they slipped away, and cut across country to their old friend, who possessed a light gun, and after procuring a bird or two they would fetch them home, and skin them. The boys were growing up now, and their father having taken up country in the South-East, and stocked it with cattle and horses, the sons were kept busy at home or at station life. Samuel White became a very fine horseman: in fact all he undertook he mastered. During their station life the brothers had little time to indulge in their hobby. Still they managed to add here and there a specimen, and they were always observant, and the love of nature was gaining a greater and greater hold upon them. Birds that were seen every day of the week in those times are now wiped out for ever. Take for instance one bird, the Swamp Parrot (*Pezoporus terrestris*). These early ornithologists have seen the black boys dismount two or three times in a day while driving cattle to devour this bird's eggs—a bird which is for ever gone in South Australia.

(To be continued.)