

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

BY HIS SON, S. A. WHITE.

[III.—THE ORNITHOLOGIST.]

Leaving Mount Mylor, near which Samuel White and his brother had camped, they passed out through Thornton's Gap, and followed a creek going north. This creek was dry and sandy, but during heavy rain it had overflowed and filled clay pans some little way back, and these supplied water for the brothers and their horse. The bird life was of the greatest interest, and new species came to their hands every day. Not only birds, but seeds, plants, land shells, insects, and many other specimens were collected. Great difficulties were experienced in many places in getting their light cart over the country, and in some localities they were days making little headway. Crossing over the tableland country they struck the Burdekin River, and followed it for a long distance in a northerly direction. Holding to his original plan of making the Gulf of Carpentaria Samuel White and his brother left the Burdekin and pushing further and further into a dry country they found that water was scarcer than ever, and had almost given up hope of finding the precious fluid when they came upon a hole containing about two gallons. Unfortunately a dead kangaroo, in an advanced stage of decomposition, lay in it. The water was boiled and half given to the horse and the remainder was strained and boiled several times, the scum being taken off at each boiling.

Soon after this it became only too apparent that these two naturalists would have to turn back, and from all accounts this they most reluctantly did, making up their minds to continue down the coastal belt. Records show that they saw one of Leichardt's marks—a large L cut deeply into a tree. The only maps available at this time were worse than useless. Watercourses were shown as having their sources in ranges marked on the maps, but the explorers found these markings to be incorrect in many cases, as no rivers were flowing anywhere near the ranges indicated. To turn back for the better watered country was easy enough, but to get there was quite a different matter. The few waters met with were drying up behind the travellers, and they had to hasten on—a difficult performance in such a rough country. One evening, after many privations and hardships, the two brothers tied up their horse to prevent it from straying and lay down, feeling sure that their end had come, for all that day the elder brother, Samuel, had searched the country around the camp for water, and although there were many likely spots none was found. . Weary and sad he had more fallen than laid himself down, and neither brother spoke to the other. The stars came out one by one, and the pall of night spread itself over the land, and we can surmise that the thoughts of these two men did not widely differ from those of other explorers who have found themselves in the same difficulties. All at once a bird call sounded clear upon the night air. Samuel White raised himself upon one elbow and listened intently. He recognised the call instantly as that of the Satin Bower Bird (*Ptilonorhynchus violaceus*), and he also knew that this bird would not be far from water. Again the call was heard, a rush of wings followed, and the bird was plainly seen passing overhead. The ornithologist, by the aid of a star, marked the direction in which the bird had flown, and then with parched throat and swollen tongue he crawled out in the direction the bird had gone. After a painful search the water was found, and then the tale is told of how the brothers struggled in their weak state to keep their horse from drinking too much—a mistake which they made themselves, and which brought on dysentery. They were very ill, and had the natives come upon them in this weak state they would have been easy victims. Although ammunition was of priceless value to them they were forced to discharge a gun at intervals during the nights on which they knew that natives were following them. I do

not think that it would be out of place here to allude to the saving of life by the knowledge of birds' habits. We know that this is by no means a solitary case. Only a short time ago Dr. Wm. MacGillivray, of Broken Hill, was telling me how his father's life, and that of a companion, was saved almost in the same way as the above, but in this case it was the flight of pigeons which attracted the attention of the early pioneer in Central Australia after he and his companion had given up all hope of finding water. There is no doubt many more would be added to the list of saved if they had only the knowledge of the habits of birds. The Satin Bower Bird had led Samuel White to a waterhole in a river, for which he had been searching for weeks, and he discovered it was many miles to the south of the position marked on the map. They followed the river as well as the nature of the ground would permit. Often belts of jungle could only be penetrated by cutting a passage for horse and cart, and the contour of the country often lead them miles out of their course. Bird life was more numerous here because many large waterholes had not dried up, but they crossed many small creeks coming down from the ranges which were quite dry. After some time it was found that this river was taking a turn into the hills, and that it would be necessary for them to cross it, so they searched for a crossing, but a good one could not be found. The side on which the brothers were was low and covered in a dense jungle to the very edge of the water, while the opposite bank was high and steep. Cutting a track through the sub-tropical jungle to the river they forded the horse and cart across the stream. But difficulties began on the other side. When half-way up the cart capsized, and with the horse rolled down the steep bank, where it was stopped by a fallen tree lying right across its course, and between this tree and the bank the mare became firmly wedged on her back, kicking and struggling frantically. The tree, being about two feet in diameter, dead and hard, it took the greater part of a day to cut it through with a blunt tomahawk before the mare could be released, and she was so numbed when she rolled into the water that the travellers despaired of saving her, but she eventually recovered. The boxes, which contained specimens, stores, ammunition, guns, etc., broke open and their contents were thrown into the water. The cart had to be taken to pieces and hauled back to the place from whence it had fallen, and there put together, and while doing this one wheel fell back

and the tire struck Samuel White's head, cutting a fearful gash and stunning him for a time, but directly he came to himself his indomitable spirit—which was ever shown through his life—again asserted itself, for his brother relates that although the blood streamed down the side of his face and saturated his clothes, his first remark was that he would sooner die than be beaten. It was late that night before they camped on comparatively level ground.

[To be continued.]

