



III. GAZELLA KWACORE - THE SPENCER BOK.



PLATE III.

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GAZELLA EUCHORE.—THE SPRINGBOK.

*Springbok* of the Cape Colonists. *Tsepe* of the Kafirs and Bechuana.

GENERIC CHARACTER.—Adult male about two feet eight inches high at the shoulder, and two or three inches more at the croup. Extreme length about four feet ten inches. Form characterized by elegance and elasticity. Head small and light; face white; both resembling a lamb's in shape and expression. Horns black, lyrate, robust; twelve or fifteen inches in length, with about twenty complete rings; the tips turned inwards, and generally inclined either forward or backward. A chesnut streak passing from the back of the horns, through the eye, to the nose. General colour of the hair, cinnamon or lively dun above; beneath pure white; the two separated by a broad rich chesnut band passing abruptly along each flank to the shoulder. On the croup are two longitudinal foldings or duplications of the skin, which commence about the middle of the back, and pass over the loins to the tail, bordered by a band of chesnut. The interior of these folds are lined with long silky hair ten or twelve inches in length, of the most dazzling and snowy whiteness, which may be concealed or displayed at pleasure. When the animal is quiescent, a white dorsal stripe only is perceptible, margined with chesnut; but when excited or in motion, the folds are suddenly expanded, so as to form a broad disk spreading over the whole croup, and producing a most singular effect. Legs slender and wiry; white inside only. Nose truly ovine. Lachrymary sinus not remarkably distinct. Ears long, attenuated, and of a dirty white colour. Eyes very full, dark, and lustrous, with long dewy lashes. Tail eight inches long, resembling a large white goose quill, bare inside, and terminated by an eccentric tuft of long wavy black hair, posteriorly directed.

Doe similar, but smaller, and of more feminine proportions; with very slender horns, either straight or capriciously bent, exhibiting a few indistinct annuli at their base. Has an udder with two mammæ. Still abundant in the colony, and distributed over the arid plains beyond it, in unlimited herds.



## CHAPTER III.

### THE SPRINGBOK.

My home is 'mid the mountain rock,  
The desert my domain :  
The countless Springboks form my flock,  
Spread o'er the boundless plain.

*Song of the wild Bushman.*

AMONGST the many striking novelties which present themselves to the eye of the traveller in Southern Africa, there are perhaps few objects more conspicuous or more beautiful than the dancing herds of graceful Springboks which speckle the broad plains of the interior, as well as some of the more remote districts of the Cape Colony. It not unfrequently happens indeed, that the wide stretching landscape literally offers no other object to rivet the attention—countless myriads of these interesting ornaments of the desert, which are apparently identical with the *Tzebi* of the Hebrews, being scattered like flocks of sheep over the plains and valleys;—abounding, at times, to such an incredible extent, that the whole face of the country, far as the eye can sweep, is absolutely white with their congregated multitudes.

Matchless in the symmetry of its form, the Springbok is measurelessly the most elegant and remarkable species of the comprehensive group to which it pertains. The dazzling contrast betwixt the lively cinnamon of its back, and the snowy whiteness of the lower parts, is agreeably heightened by the intensely rich chesnut bands which traverse the flanks—its dark beaming eye, with its innocent and lamb-like expression of face, and the showy folds of gossamer on the haunches—displayed or concealed at the animal's volition—combining to render it one of the most beautiful objects in the animal creation. As the traveller advances over the trackless expanse, hundreds of this delicately formed antelope bound away on either side of his path with meteor-like and sportive velocity, winging their bird-like flight by a quick succession of those singularly elastic leaps, which have given rise to its colonial appellation, and which enable it to surpass as well in swiftness as in grace, almost every other mammiferous quadruped.

But although frequently found herding by itself, the Springbok is more usually detected in the society of Gnoos, Quaggas, Ostriches, or Blesboks. Fleet as the wind, and thoroughly conscious of its own speed, it mingles with their motley herds, sauntering about with an easy careless gait, occasionally with outstretched neck approaching some coquettish doe, and spreading its own glittering white folds so as to effect a sudden and complete metamorphosis of exterior from fawn color to white. Wariest of the wary, however, the Springboks are ever the first to take the alarm, and to lead the retreating column. Pricking their taper ears, and elevating their graceful little heads upon the first appearance of any strange object, a dozen or more trot nimbly off to a distance, and having gazed impatiently for an instant to satisfy themselves of the actual presence of an enemy,—putting their white noses to the ground, they begin in colonial phraseology to *pronken*, or make “a brave show.” Unfurling the snowy folds on their haunches so as to display around the elevated scut, a broad white gossamer disk, shaped like the spread tail of a peacock, away they all go with a succession of strange perpendicular bounds, rising with curved loins high into the air, as if they had been struck with battledores,—rebounding to the height of ten or twelve feet with the elasticity of corks thrown against a hard floor; vaulting over each other's backs with depressed heads and stiffened limbs, as if engaged in a game at leap frog; and after appearing for a second as if suspended in the air,—clearing at a single spring from ten to fifteen feet of ground without the smallest perceptible exertion—down come all four feet together with a single thump, and nimbly spurning the earth beneath, away they soar again, as if about to take flight,—invariably clearing a road or beaten track by a still higher leap than all—as if their natural disposition to regard man as an enemy induced them to mistrust even the ground upon which he had trodden.

The *trek bokken*—as the Colonists are wont to term the immense migratory swarms of these beautiful antelopes, which to the destruction of every green herb, occasionally inundate the abodes of civilization—not only form one of the most remarkable features in the Zoology of Southern Africa, but may also be reckoned amongst the most extraordinary examples of the fecundity of animal life. To form any estimate of their numbers on such occasions would be perfectly impossible—the havoc committed in their onward progress falling nothing short of the ravages of a wasting swarm of locusts. Pouring down, like the devastating curse of Egypt, from their native plains in the interior whence they have been driven, after protracted drought, by the failure of the stagnant pools on which they have relied, whole legions of Springboks, abandoning the parched soil, throng with one accord to deluge and lay waste the cultivated regions around the Cape; and so effectually does the van of the vast column destroy every vestige of verdure, that the rear is often reduced to positive starvation. The Lion has then been seen stalking in the middle of the compressed phalanx, removed little more than a paw's length from his powerless victims; while flocks of sheep have not unfrequently been swept away by the living torrent, and no more seen. Ere the morning's dawn, cultivated fields, which the evening before appeared proud of their promising verdure, despite of every precaution that can be taken, are reaped level with the ground; and the grazier, despoiled of his lands, is driven to seek pasture for his flocks elsewhere, until the bountiful thunder-clouds re-animating nature, restore vegetation to the burnt up country. Then these unwelcome visitors, whose ranks, during their short but destructive sojourn, have been thinned both by man and beast, retire instinctively to their secluded abodes, to renew their depredations when necessity shall again compel them.



Yet so distinctly has the unerring hand of Nature prescribed to each species of antelope the limit of its own *cantonment*, that whilst those which inhabit the wide and open savannahs, are never known either to wander into the woodlands or climb to higher levels, others, whose locality is restricted to the fen, the forest, or the mountain top, evince no disposition to trespass upon the prairie. Although liberally distributed over every level part of Southern Africa, the uninterrupted sandy plains which border upon the equator, may be considered the head-quarters of the Springbok. In this region of stunted bushes and brackish pools, they increase and multiply to an unlimited extent, and are disturbed by none save by wild beasts, and the yet wilder sons of the desert, who, regarding them as their own flocks, occasionally entrap them in pit-falls, or poison the stagnant waters to which they resort. Like all creatures, however, whose weakness renders them a prey to the more ferocious, their increase bears to their diminution a relative proportion; and though thousands annually fall to glut the prowlers of the waste, their loss is yearly supplied. Retreating as human society advances, the wilds, the deserts, and the solitude, have still formed their homes. Preferring scorched and open tracts where they are least likely to be assailed with success by any of their numerous enemies, these vigilant and timid animals would appear to select for their haunts, the most bleak and barren heaths—treeless and sometimes shrubless flats, where they browse on the heather and withered herbage, and nibble the bitter succulents which abound in such situations, thriving especially,

O'er the brown Karroo, where the bleating cry  
Of the Springbok's fawn sounds plaintively.

In common with most gregarious quadrupeds, those of the antilopine tribe more particularly, this species evinces the greatest curiosity at the sight of objects to which it has been unaccustomed—bounding away in the utmost alarm, with a lightness and grace absolutely unrivalled, but suddenly stopping in the midst of its headlong flight, to turn and gaze at the object of its terror. Its usual cry is a feeble bleat, resembling the voice of a lamb, but whilst thus scrutinizing strange objects, it utters a sneezing noise, accompanied by an impatient twitching of the head; the taper foot being stamped petulantly on the ground at the same time. The young fawns are easily reared, and in a domesticated state are extremely gentle, playful, and confiding; going forth with the flocks to pasture, and constantly forming the cherished pet of the farmer's children, whom they will follow about with the attachment of a dog.

Trusting for their escape to speed alone, in no animal are the senses of sight, of hearing, and of smell, found in more exquisite perfection than in the true antelope. Its dark glancing eye, no less than its proverbial symmetry of form, has ever been a theme of poetical enthusiasm; and both have furnished to Eastern bards the choicest images wherewith to illustrate perfection in female charms. The most celebrated of our modern poets have employed the same beautiful metaphors; and

Maidens in whose orient eyes  
More than summer sunshine lies,

might "look on those of the Gazelle," and envy their long silken fringes and speaking brilliancy. From the increased volume of the auditory cavity, which determines the power of hearing, the ear of the antelope derives great superiority over that of every other ruminating animal; and the powers of scent, as well as the facilities of breathing, are greatly increased by the sack or suborbital pouch, which in different species is found variously developed and more or less capable of contraction and expansion. The antelopes constitute far the largest assemblage in the whole order of ruminants, and although subdivided into numerous small groups or sections, possess in common the distinguishing feature of persistent horns, standing usually above and between the arches of the orbits. Consisting of solid osseous cores externally sheathed over with true horny matter, which increases by the addition of successive layers in proportion to the growth of the internal nucleus, they form part and parcel of the frontal bone, and are consequently never shed like those of the stag. Nothing therefore can be more grating to the ear either of the sportsman or the naturalist, than to hear the antelopes termed *deer*, not a single species of which tribe exists in Southern or Central Africa. The horns of all antelopes are simple or unbranched, but whilst some are perfectly smooth, the surface of others, like the lyriform appurtenances of the Springbok, are more or less annulated with raised circular rings. Buffon was however mistaken in supposing the age to be indicated by the number of these rings, Pallas having clearly shown that although there is a positive augmentation in their number as the animal advances in age, yet, since the horns themselves increase less and less in volume during each succeeding year of existence, there can subsist no equal relation between the progress of life and the development of the annuli.

Alas! in the Colony of the Cape of Storms, how have the wild sports dwindled from their former prosperity. Those gloomy forests that no longer clothe the base of the cloud capped mountain which frowns over the metropolis, were tenanted in ruder times by the noblest as well as by the wisest of the brute creation. But before the strides of civilization, together with the rugged aborigines, have receded also the scarcely more savage quadrupeds; and saving certain diminutive antelopes which will hereafter be noticed as frequenting the sea coast, the Springbok now affords the only four-footed game that occurs in any abundance. Man, whether in an uncultivated or civilized state, is ever a hunting animal; *venator* has been his synonym from time immemorial; and this beautiful antelope is consequently slaughtered in vast numbers by the Dutch Boors both on account of the pleasant pastime its pursuit affords, and for the sake of the venison, which although lean, is delicate and well tasted. No facilities existing for approach on foot, the sport, as well from necessity as from choice, is universally followed on horseback—a dozen farmers or more, usually assembling for the purpose of *yaking and schutting de wild*,\* each on his broad shoulder bearing a *roer* or gun, of astounding bore and gigantic dimensions. A large square of ivory which is invariably attached by a stout leathern thong to the muzzle, performs the duty of a sight; and, it being next to impossible to find a Dutchman who would lend himself to the modern detonating innovations, the apparatus for accomplishing ignition is scarcely less primitive. On a shaggy three-cornered *paard*, whose outward appearance betokens neither acquaintance with the grain bag nor currycomb, sits Mynheer Buffel as though ensconced on his easy chair; a meerschaum of half smoked tobacco, his never failing companion in arms, protruding from the pocket of his greasy waistcoat. He is clad in a jacket, somewhat coarser in the texture than

\* Anglicé, Hunting and shooting game.



sackcloth; and a pair of tanned sheepskin trousers, commonly called crackers, envelop his nether man. His lower extremities are thrust into pieces of fresh hide, which have accommodated themselves to the shape of his huge feet; and a white felt hat with an ample quaker brim, shades his uncombed head. By his side dangles a magazine of powder, constructed of an entire ox horn of those Brobdignagian dimensions which only Africa can produce; and his loins are girt about with a pouch containing a corresponding supply of two ounce balls. Similar in size and shape of person, similarly arrayed, and similarly equipped, forth ride the *booren* to the hunting ground, distributing themselves over the plain, and approaching at a slow pace as near as the game will permit. Like most other antelopes the Springbok almost invariably runs against the wind when alarmed. By preserving the windward guage therefore, to use a nautical expression, and galloping on a diagonal course, nothing is easier, upon a tolerable horse, than to intersect their path, and thus compel the whole herd to cross within a few yards of the gun:

## In speed

They sprightly put their faith, and roused by fear  
Give all their swift aerial forms to flight;  
Against the breeze they dart that way the more,  
To leave the murderer's lessening cry behind.

As the white rumped bucks sweep past, Harlequin-like, by a succession of magic bounds, *ricochetting* over each other's heads as if struck with a cricket bat, and invariably following every four or five springs by as many strokes of a gallop,—the Dutchman, vaulting heavily from the well-padded saddle, delivers his shot, first casting the bridle over the head of the perfectly trained horse, which will stand if necessary for hours together without attempting to stir from the spot. Delicate and fragile as the Springbok appears, many a choice morsel of its venison nevertheless escapes the spit or the cabob-stick, after the successful marksman has counted it his own. What boots the loss of a limb? Every antelope can run better upon three legs than upon four, and a heavy bullet may pass through and through the tender form of one of these tough lived little animals without so much as causing its pace to slacken; although, after keeping up the race for some distance with its more fortunate *confères*, it is destined to sink upon the wide plain and close its bright eye for ever.

The mystic operation of *breaking*, or in vulgar phraseology, of cutting up the quarry, preparatory to packing it away behind the saddle, immediately follows. The head and offal having first been removed, and either thrown to the vultures, or quarrelled for by the Hottentot attendants, whose perquisite they are acknowledged to be, the cavity is stuffed with whatever grass or herbs may be obtainable. A portion of the front skin being left entire, the knee joints are then divided, and the tarsal bones stripped to the fetlock; the bones of the pelvis are also cut through, and the *couteau de chasse* introduced between the two middle vertebræ of the spine to make it *ride steady*. The carcase, which in an adult buck is fully as heavy as that of the largest sheep, having then with some difficulty been thrown across the horse's crupper, the dangling tarsal bones are twisted under the girths on either side in order to secure it in that position, and Mynheer resumes his saddle and his sport. Of a truth, a field of portly boors fully harnessed, pricking their wretched garrons over the plain, and having each a cumbrous carcase bumping at his breech, is a sight passing goodly to behold. Two Springboks may even thus be carried without alarming inconvenience to the equestrian; but as the steed cannot of course under such circumstances move beyond a foot's pace, it is usual to bring pack horses into the field—although in default thereof, and as a *dernier ressort*, a third carcase may still be thrown across the saddle. This arrangement is little patronized by the boors, who at best are sorry pedestrians, but it was one to which, in the absence of assistance, I was frequently compelled to have recourse. Having no fear of the *sambok* before their sullen sunken eyes, the Hottentots of our party greatly preferred shooting on their own account, to assisting me in the toils of the chase, which indeed they rarely condescended to do. The most brilliant exploit of venerie claimed by these lazy gentlemen during the whole expedition, was achieved before crossing the Colonial boundary, when three of the best shots having wheedled us out of a supply of ammunition to admit of their proving their new *roers*—expended no less than six rounds of it upon a feeble fawn which had recently been dropped under a thorn bush. Failing altogether in their murderous designs, the little wretch was ultimately taken prisoner, only alas! to become food for our famished Zoroastrian domestic, whose religious antipathies prevented his even tasting the flesh of any animal that wore a bovine expression of face, and who, but for this timely windfall, might peradventure have been starved.