



V. EQUUS BURCHELLII.- BURCHELL'S ZEBRA.

PLATE V.

EQUUS BURCHELLII—BURCHELL'S ZEBRA.

Bonte Quagga of the Cape Colonists. *Peetsey* of the Matabili and Bechuana.

GENERIC CHARACTER.—Male measures four feet six inches high at the shoulder, and eight feet six inches from the nose to the point of the tail. Figure sturdy, but graceful. Carcase round. Limbs clean and muscular, rather less robust than those of the Quagga. Crest remarkably arched, and surmounted by a standing mane, hogged, five inches high, and banded black and white alternately. Ears and tail equine; the latter thirty-five inches long, white and flowing; muzzle black. Coat short and glossy, general ground colour of the head, neck, and body lively sienna, capriciously, but harmoniously banded with black and deep brown transverse stripes, imparting a brilliant effect, and arranged singly and doubly so as to form various figures, all unconnected with the dorsal line which widens over the croup. Belly and legs pure white. Obscure traces of black transverse markings on the arm. Bare spots above the knees on the inside.

Female similar. Has an udder with four mammæ. Inhabits the plain country beyond the Gareep or Orange river, in immense herds, but is never found to the Southward of that stream.

CHAPTER V.

BURCHELL'S ZEBRA.

Oh, yes, there is freedom, and joy, and pride,
Afar in the desert alone to ride!
There is rapture to vault on the champing steed,
And to bound away with the eagle's speed;
With the death-fraught firelock in my hand
The only law of the desert land.

INTERMEDIATE in point of coloring betwixt the common Quagga and the true Zebra, the brilliant species of the equine genus here portrayed, supplants the first named of its allies to the North of the Orange river, as does the Kokoon, its congener the Gnoo; and seldom congregating in herds of fewer than eighty or an hundred, it abounds to a great extent in all the districts included between that noble stream and the Southern tropic. Occupying the same regions, and delighting in the same pastures as the Brindled Gnoo, rarely is it to be seen unless in the companionship of that fantastic animal, whose presence would appear to be almost indispensable to its happiness. It is singular enough that the members of two families so perfectly foreign to each other, should display so great a predilection for each other's society, uniformly intermixing as they do, and herding together in bonds of the closest friendship. Fierce, strong, fleet, and surpassingly beautiful, there is perhaps no quadruped in the creation, not even excepting the mountain Zebra, more splendidly attired, or presenting a picture of more singularly attractive beauty, than this free-born of the desert. It would be difficult to convey to the uninitiated a suitable idea of the sparkling effect produced by their vivid and strikingly contrasted colors, when seen 'pawing in the valley' in all the pride of conscious liberty, or flying in compact columns before the equestrian foe; but I shall nevertheless attempt the description of a scene which is one of every day occurrence in the interior wilderness of Southern Africa.

Mixed up with the tracks of the Kokoon, the prints left by the compact hoofs of a herd of Burchell's Zebras are perceived in the naked sand, and presently afterwards a small troop consisting of both species—the vanguard of a vast horde—is observed leisurely grazing in the distance. An extensive plain of glaring red sand exhibits here and there patches of sun burnt herbage, interspersed with tufts of the prickly cactus; the landscape being scantily shaded by occasional clumps of light plume-shaped mimosas, and the view bounded by a trivial ridge of distant blue hills.

Bare are those sands, yet smiling there
Th' acacia waves her yellow hair,
Lonely and sweet, nor loved the less
For flowering in the wilderness.

Anon, a dark pillar of dust arises from the plain, and undisturbed by any breath in heaven, mounts upwards to the clear azure sky like a wreath of smoke—three ill omened vultures soaring in circles above it. Nearer and more near, rolls on the thickening column, until several dark living objects are shortly perceived dancing beneath it. Emerging from the obscurity, their glossy and exquisitely variegated coats glittering in the sun's rays, *ventre au terre*, the head of a column of a Burchell's Zebras next appears, and instantly afterwards the serried horde sweep past in gallant array, their hoofs clattering on the hard ground like a regiment of dragoons. Tearing by at racing speed, straining neck and neck with their shaggy and whimsical looking bovine allies, their own striped and proudly curved necks seem as though they were clothed with thunder, and their snowy tails are streaming behind them. Now the troop has wheeled and halted for an instant to survey the foe. A powerful stallion advances a few paces with distended nostrils and stately gait, his mane newly hogged, and his ample tail switching his gaily chequered thighs. Hastily reconnoitring the huntsman, he snorts wildly, and instantly gallops back to his cohort. Away they scour again, neighing and tossing their striped heads aloft, swishing their light mule-like tails in all the pride of fleetness and freedom. Another halt and another *reconnoissance*. Her small equine ears laid viciously down, a skittish mare has now fallen out of the ranks, and is in the act of delivering both her active heels plump into the ribs of an admirer, whose wantonness has prompted him to seize a tempting opportunity for inflicting upon her sternum an amorous bite. And now, with a neigh of exultation and a vain glorious toss of her coquettish head, free and unfettered as the wind, away she careers again, still waited upon by her lover, who is nothing daunted by his rebuff—and their forms are finally concealed by the cloud which follows the heels of the again retreating squadron.

Thus moving in compact bodies, this beautiful animal, like its brother already described, may be ridden up to and slain with little difficulty; although—carrying no weight, and being withal passing speedy—it could puzzle the best horse in a single chase. A very short run was sufficient to seal the fate of three stallions out of the first herd I met with. Not having seen a single human being either before or during the chase, I believed myself perfectly alone, but no sooner had I dismounted to secure the game, than a woolly head protruded itself from behind every diminutive bush, and in an instant I was surrounded by upwards of thirty hungry savages, who having, by not to be mistaken signs, expressed their unqualified approbation of my performance, proceeded uninvited to devour the carcase with frightful avidity—greedily drinking the blood, besmearing their bodies with the yellow fat, and not leaving even so much as the entrails for the disappointed birds of prey. A large mixed herd of Sassaybes and Zebras, alarmed by the sudden appearance of our cavalcade, charged past me on another occasion so close that one of the latter fell to each barrel of my rifle, and was in like manner

immediately cut up by the savages, the remnant, which they could not eat, being spitted on their assegais to dry. So voracious and impatient were these gentlemen, that a splendid stallion whose hinder leg I had fractured, and whom I had left alive on the plain with the design of eventually driving him to the waggons to stand for his portrait, was absolutely devoured before I could return to the spot;—whilst killing other two out of the herd, the villains had stolen behind him as he sulked, and making a long arm, had slipped an assegai into his heart. The scattered inhabitants of the part of the country in which this occurred, and in which we found the Zebra in greatest abundance, are the remnants of various Bechuana tribes, which have been despoiled by the strong arm of the conqueror. Living in small communities, these indigent wretches are utterly destitute of cattle, and depend entirely for subsistence upon locusts, or such game as chance may direct to their pit-falls. Crowds of them, attracted by prey, hovered around us during most of our hunting excursions; and having obtained a supply of meat, with the luxuries of snuff and tobacco, for which they were constantly importuning under the denomination of *lishuena* and *muchuco*, they composed themselves to sleep, appearing to be in the enjoyment of as much happiness as man, in a state of mere animal existence, probably ever attains.

Xenophon, when describing the chase of the wild ass on the plains of Mesopotamia, during the march of the army of the younger Cyrus, declares the flesh of that animal to have been found on trial fully as well flavoured, but even more tender, than that of the red deer! The savage epicures of Southern Africa would certainly appear to entertain the same sentiments with respect to that of the Zebra, although to us it appeared infinitely more rank, oily, and carrion-like, than horse-flesh. Many of our savage associates had their incisorial teeth filed to a point, probably to admit of their more readily separating the tough fibres; and at one time even our own followers affected to prefer Zebra's flesh to excellent mutton, which John April, on the part of the fraternity, expressed their inability to eat *on account of its fatness!* Latterly however, the lazy rascals became somewhat less dainty;—mutton was actually eaten, and the flesh of the Zebra rejected, upon the score of a tradition that those who ate long, of the latter, invariably became striped!! The fact of the ostrich and wild ass mixing together with a seeming relish for each other's society, which was also remarked by Xenophon, is likewise observable with reference to Burchell's Zebra, the spire-like neck of the gigantic camel-bird being very commonly seen towering in the midst of the richly painted herd. Decorated with white and black plumes from the ostrich, the scalp and mask of the Zebra, *with the ears on*, formed the favorite head dress of our followers—the fashion having first been set by Frederick Dangler, whose inimitable taste in all matters connected with the toilet, was acknowledged by every one. A foal, perfectly striped, and withal one of the most beautiful little creatures that can be imagined,—mistaking our motley party for his own, from which it had been separated by a charge directed against a drove of portly Elands,—once joined us most confidently, neighing and frisking by the side of our horses a very considerable distance during the chase, ere it discovered its mistake.

Beautifully clad by the hand of nature;—possessing much of the graceful symmetry of the horse, with great bone and muscular power, united to easy and stylish action—thus combining comeliness of figure with solidity of form,—*Equus Burchellii*, if subjugated and domesticated, would assuredly make the best pony in the world. Although it admits of being tamed to a certain extent with considerable facility—a half domesticated specimen with a jockey on its brindled back being occasionally exposed in Cape town for sale—it has hitherto contrived to evade the yoke of servitude. The love of liberty, which in our own species is extolled to the skies, never fails when found in the animal creation, to bring reproach under the denomination of obstinacy and vice; and those persons who have had the best opportunities of becoming acquainted with the character of this species, pronounce it, even in its most tractable state, as wicked, treacherous, obstinate and fickle. The voice of this free-born of the desert has no analogy to the discordant braying of the ass, but consists of a shrill abrupt neigh, which may be likened to the barking of a dog, as heard by a passer by, from the interior of a house. The senses of sight, hearing, and smell, are extremely delicate. The slightest noise or motion, no less than the appearance of any object that is unfamiliar, at once rivets their gaze, and causes them to stop and listen with the utmost attention—any taint in the air, equally attracting their olfactory organs. Instinct having taught these beautiful animals that in union consists their strength, they combine in a compact group when menaced by an attack either from man or beast; and if overtaken by the foe, they unite for mutual defence with their heads together in a close circular band, presenting their heels to the enemy, and dealing out kicks in equal force and abundance. Beset on all sides, or partially crippled, they rear on their hinder legs, fly at the adversary with jaws distended, and use both teeth and heels with the greatest freedom.

To him who explores unknown regions for the advancement of science, or to the man whom the fickle billows have tossed upon a desolate shore, how indispensable is a knowledge of the huntsman's craft! An intimate acquaintance with those gentle arts which are most successful in the circumvention of the nobler species of game quadrupeds, might frequently prove the means of saving the life of the adventurer, whose existence, from fortuitous circumstances, may have become dependent on his skill in *venerie*. There are even situations in which the rational and civilized being will be inwardly sensible of his inferiority in some respects to the uncultivated child of nature;—situations in which he will feel that all the accomplishments upon which he has most prided himself, and which he has most laboured to attain, would be well exchanged for the iron bound frame of the savage, that knows no fatigue, neither flags under any privation;—for the eye that, ranging over the trackless waste, or the barren mountain side, can distinguish landmarks to direct the course, where, to his unpractised gaze, all around assumes one uniformly perplexing exterior. The country adjoining the desert of Chooi, North of Litakoo, in which we first fell in with Burchell's Zebra, is particularly remarkable for this sameness of feature. Immense sandy flats, with a substratum of lime, are uniformly covered with mokaala trees, low scrubby looking thorn bushes, and sun-scorched grass,—interspersed with numerous dry tanks, each wearing a precisely similar appearance. Here and there occur clusters of deserted wigwams, all redolent of savage smells, equally abounding in vermin, and alike strewn with fragments of ostrich egg shells, and with portions of animal hide. But it not unfrequently happens, that for whole days together not a single human being is to be discovered; and nowhere is there seen either hill, or other conspicuous object, which might serve as a beacon to guide the footsteps of the wanderer. Out of this strange uniformity of landscape arose the troubles which shall now be detailed.

The waggons having started betimes one delightful morning towards the Meritsane river, which was to be our next stage, I turned off the road, if so a few wheel ruts may be termed, in pursuit of a troop of Brindled Gnoos, and presently came upon another, which was joined by a third still larger—then by a vast herd of Zebras, and again by more Gnoos, with Sassaybes and Hartebeests, pouring down from every quarter in the manner noticed in the preceding chapter, until the landscape absolutely presented the appearance of a moving mass of game.* Closing with their front ranks and riding parallel to the cohort in order to escape the dust and pebbles which were cast up by their hoofs, I dismounted as opportunity offered—firing both barrels of my rifle into the retreating phalanx, and leaving the ground behind me strewed with the slain. “In *all* guns there is danger, but in a *double* gun there is *double* danger,” was the aphorism of a sporting gentleman of the olden school, who held second barrels in most salutary dread: and doubtless the ghosts of the slaughtered Gnoos could testify to its correctness! Still unsatisfied, I could not resist the temptation of mixing yet again with the fugitives, firing and reloading until my jaded horse suddenly exhibited symptoms of distress, and shortly afterwards was unable to move. Discovering at this moment that I had dropped a pocket compass which I carried in preference to a watch—and being unwilling to lose so valuable an ally—I turned loose my steed to crop the scanty grass, and carefully retraced my steps several miles in search of it without success,—the print of my horse’s hoofs being at length obliterated in those of the countless herds which had crossed the plain. Completely absorbed in the chase, I had retained a very imperfect idea of my locality, but returning to my horse, I led him in what I believed to be a North-easterly direction, knowing from a sketch of the country which had been given me at Litakoo by our excellent friend Mr. Moffat, and which, together with drawing materials, I always carried about me, that that course would eventually bring me to the Meritsane. Seating myself under a tree, I repeatedly and deliberately scanned the heavens in order to satisfy myself of the direction, and after dragging my weary horse nearly the whole of the day under a burning sun, my flagging spirits were at length revived by the appearance of several villages. Under other circumstances, I should have avoided intercourse with their inhospitable inmates, but dying with thirst, I eagerly entered each in succession, and to my inexpressible disappointment, found them deserted. Evidences existing of their having been recently inhabited, I shot a Hartebeest, in the hope that the smell of meat might attract some straggler to the spot. But no! Though the keen-sighted vultures, that were my only attendants, descended in multitudes, not one woolly headed negro appeared to dispute the prey. In many of the trees I observed large thatched houses resembling haystacks; and under the impression that these had been erected in so singular a position by the natives, as a measure of security against the Lions, whose recent tracks I could distinguish in every direction, I ascended more than one in the hope of at least finding some vessel containing water. Alas! they proved to be the habitations of large communities of Social Grosbeaks, those winged republicans already described, but of whose architecture and magnificent edifices, I had until then entertained a very inadequate conception. Faint and bewildered, my prospects began to brighten as the shadows of evening lengthened. Large troops of Ostriches running in one direction, plainly indicated that I was approaching water: and immediately afterwards, I struck into a path impressed with the foot-marks of women and children—soon arriving at a nearly dry river, which, running East and West, I at once concluded to be that of which I was in search.

Those only who have suffered as I did during that day from prolonged thirst, can form a competent idea of the delight, and I may add, energy, afforded me by the first draught of the putrid waters of the Meritsane. They equally invigorated my exhausted steed, whom I mounted immediately, and cantered up the bank of the river, in order if possible to reach the waggons before dark. The banks are precipitous—the channel deep, broken and rocky: clusters of reeds and long grass indicating those spots which retain the water during the hot months. It was with no small difficulty, after crossing the river, that I forced my way through the broad belt of tangled bushes which margined the edge. The moonless night was fast closing around, and my weary horse again began to droop. The Lions, commencing their nightly prow, were roaring in all directions, and no friendly fire or beacon presenting itself to my view, the only alternative was to bivouac where I was, and to renew my search in the morning. Kindling a fire, I formed a thick bush into a pretty secure hut, by cutting away the middle, and closing the entrance with thorn branches; and having knee-haltered my horse to prevent his straying, I proceeded to dine upon a Guinea fowl—whose head I had fortunately knocked off with a rifle ball, as the speckled fowl roosted with many others on the tree over head—concluding the repast with another draught of impure water. Hoping to descry a beacon fire I again ascended the tallest tree, but my eye ranged round the gloomy horizon in vain. The monarchs of the forest now roared incessantly, and so alarmed my horse that I was obliged repeatedly to discharge my rifle in order to give him confidence. It was piercingly cold, and all my fuel being expended, I suffered as much from chill and cramp, as I had done during the day from the scorching heat. About three o’clock however, completely overcome by fatigue, I could keep my eyes open no longer, but commending myself to the protecting care of Providence, fell into a profound sleep.

My first thoughts, on opening my eyes in the morning, were naturally of my horse. Starting from my heathy bed, and extricating myself with some difficulty from the *abattis* behind which I was ensconced, I hastened to the spot where I had last seen him—but his place was empty. I roamed every where in search of him, and ascended every tree which offered a good look out, but he was nowhere to be seen. It was more than probable that he had been eaten by Lions, but when I had almost given up the search in despair, and was reluctantly resolving to depart without him, to my joy I at length found his foot-mark, and traced him to a deep hollow near the river’s brink, where he was quietly grazing. The night’s rest, if so it could be called, had so far restored him to strength, that I forthwith pursued my journey along the bank of the river, which I now re-crossed opposite to the site of some former scene of strife, marked by numerous human skeletons, bleached by exposure. A little further on I disturbed a large Lion which walked slowly off, occasionally stopping and looking sulkily over his shoulder, as he deliberately ascended the opposite bank. In the course of half an hour, I reached the end of dense jungle, and immediately discovered the waggon road; but as I could detect no recent traces

* Narrative p. 68.

upon it, I turned to the Southward, and after riding seven or eight miles in the direction of our last encampment, had the unspeakable satisfaction of perceiving the white waggons drawn up under a spreading tree in the middle of the plain. A volley from my rifle, fired at a little distance from the camp, had already relieved the anxiety of my companion and followers, who, in consequence of the unexpected length of the march, had been compelled when darkness overtook them, to halt in that position. During the whole night they had entertained the most gloomy forebodings on my account—*Cœur de Lion*, my valet, perching himself, pipe in mouth, on his favorite post on the waggon top, and exclaiming with agonised accents every ten minutes "I dont see master." Having however tasted little nourishment for thirty hours, it will easily be understood why I was not over attentive to his anecdotes,—introduced *à propos* of my adventures,—of sundry luckless pilgrims of his acquaintance, who had been torn piece-meal by lions, or toasted upon the assegais of the cannibals!



Skin of Burchell's Zebra as preserved by Capt. Harris.