



1. CATOBLEPAS GNOD - THE GNOD.

PLATE I.

CATOBLEPAS GNOO.—THE GNOO, OR WILDE BEEST.

Wilde Beest (wild ox) of the Cape Colonists.—'Gnoo' of the Hottentots.—*Impatoomo* of the Matabili.

GENERIC CHARACTER.—Adult male upwards of four feet high at the shoulder, and nine in extreme length. General contour very muscular, and exhibitiv of great energy. Head heavy and square. Muzzle large, spread out and flattened, with narrow linear nostrils. Above it, on the chaffron, is seated a conspicuous tuft of black bristling hairs, radiating laterally, and resembling a blacking brush. A tuft of similar hair seated beneath each eye, concealing a gland, which distils a viscous humour. Eye wild and fiery; surrounded by a star-like fringe of white bristles, diverging as the radii of a circle. Numerous stiff white bristles scattered over the upper lip. Ears small and pointed. Horns arising from a basal mass which expands over the forehead so as to form a solid helmet furrowed upon the summit: scarcely advancing from the head, they taper out sideways over the eyes, and uncinat up into a pointed hook, sweeping with a regular curve, and producing an aspect, sinister, suspicious, and vindictive. Shoulder deep. Neck resembling that of a high-fed bull, with heavy crest, and much arched. Carcase round. A cushion of fat seated on either haunch. Legs slender and long, shaped like those of a stag. Hoofs of a blue-black color, and pointed. A full vertical mane on the summit of the crest, wearing the appearance of a neatly trimmed *hog*, and consisting of quantities of upright wiry white hair, tipped with brown, so as to form a dark border. A bushy black beard flowing from the chin and dewlap; and a full bush of shaggy black wavy hair depending betwixt the forelegs from the brisket, and extending some distance along the belly. Tail equine, white, and sweeping to the ground. General complexion of the hair a deep umber-brown, ranging upon black.

Female similar, but smaller, and exhibiting less depth of color. Her horns slighter and less expanded, and their bases less approximated. Has an udder with four mammæ. Very gregarious. Abundant on the open plains of the Vaal river, and still occurring in some Parts of Cape Colony.

CHAPTER I.

THE GNOO.

But soon, 'mid Afric's landscape lone,
Old reminiscences are gone:
Soon we raise the eye to range
O'er prospects wild, grotesque, and strange—
Beasts of mix'd, and monstrous birth,
Creations of some fabled earth,
Bursting like whirlwind through the waste,
With clattering hoofs, and headlong haste.

A MORE whimsical compound than the Gnoo could scarcely have been thrown together, or a monster imagined of more fantastical and anomalous exterior. At the first glance, a stranger to the African Fauna would conclude that the shaggy head of the American Bison had been tacked, *centaur-like*, upon the shoulders of a pony;—the equine similarity of the arched neck and well-rounded crupper, being materially enhanced by the neatly clipped mane, and long flowing tail;—whilst the legs, which are slender, vigorous, and well knit, are no less strikingly cervine. Exhibiting this absurd combination of characters, each in itself the peculiar feature of some other quadruped, Naturalists have ever been greatly perplexed in deciding upon the legitimate position which should be assigned to so singular an animal. Originally, it was classed with the Antelopes, between which and the Buffalo, it unquestionably forms the link;—but, possessing in general aspect, figure, and motions, as well as in the texture and taste of the flesh, attributes which most strongly partake of the bovine character, Zoologists have at length become unanimously agreed upon the propriety of transferring it to a genus more closely allied to the taurine group.

The supposed identity of the Gnoo, with the terrific animal referred to by Ælian under the title of *Catoblepas*, (*Κατωκέλυ*), has latterly led to the adoption of that classical, and far more appropriate nomenclature. Inhabiting Ethiopia near the sources of the Nile, the *Catoblepas* is described by Pliny, as “a savage and sluggish beast resembling a bull, but endowed with a more fierce and terrible aspect;—its eyes red with blood like those of an ox, surmounted by large and elevated brows, and having their deadly glance directed obliquely towards the earth, *nomen unde derivatur*; its ponderous head, which it carries low, furnished with a flowing mane, which descends over the forehead, and so covers the face, as to impart additional terror to its appearance.” That the ancients should have invested, with something of the marvellous, so whimsical a creature as the subject of the annexed portrait, is by no means surprising; and Pliny's description, although obviously vague and extravagant, is altogether far from being inapplicable to the Gnoo, the limits of whose range are undefined, and a variety of which may not improbably have been seen by the Romans, when they had carried their conquest towards the more central regions of the African continent.

In habits also, as well as in appearance, the Gnoo is of all quadrupeds perhaps the most awkward and grotesque. Nature doubtless formed him in one of her freaks, and it is scarcely possible to contemplate his ungainly antics without laughter. Wheeling and prancing in every direction, his shaggy and bearded head arched between his slender and muscular legs, and his long white tail streaming in the wind, this pantomimic, and ever wary animal, has at once a ferocious and a ludicrous appearance. Suddenly stopping, shewing an imposing front, and tossing his grizzled head in mock defiance, his wild red sinister eyes flash fire, and his snort, resembling the roar of a lion, is repeated with energy and effect. Then lashing his pillowed flanks with his floating tail, he plunges, bounds, kicks up his heels with a fantastic flourish, and in a moment is off again at speed, making the dust fly behind him as he sweeps across the plain.

'His eyes are jet, and they are set, in crystal rings of snow,
But now they stare, with one red glare, of brass upon their foe;
Low to his knee, his head holds he, his nostrils snuff the wind,
To his heel doth trail, his silvery tail, swinging his flanks behind.'

Although daily becoming more rare, *wilde beests*, or wild cattle, as these eccentric quadrupeds are designated by the Dutch Boors, may still be found on the desert tracts called *Karoo*,* as well as in some of the most remote and unfrequented districts of the Cape Colony. Gregarious, fretful, and of extremely restless habits,—although seeming to be alike regardless of water, herbage, and shade,—the Gnoo migrates from place to place, according to the season; and large troops are constantly to be seen by the traveller, grazing in the society of the Quagga and Springbok, or scouring the broad and verdant plains of the interior, in wide extended circles—moving usually in single files—butting, capering, and curvetting, in the performance of the most intricate and fanciful manœuvres, their track followed by ascending columns of dust which their heels have raised;—a goodly knot of giant ostriches,—the independent tenants of the same wilds,—tricked out in their holiday plumes, not unfrequently enacting the part of reviewing General and staff, with such grave propriety, as forcibly to remind the spectator of a cavalry parade. Seen roaming singly during the season of *rutting*, or careering over the broad daisied prairie, jerking its long switch tail, and uttering at intervals that deep hollow moan which may best be expressed by

* *Karoo*. A dry desert plain. The Great Karroo is an uninhabitable waste, forming an elevated steppe of table land, 300 miles long by 90 broad, which stretches along the northern border of the Colony, betwixt the great ridges styled *Zwartbergen*, and *Sneeuwbergen*, anglicé the Black and the Snowy Mountains.

dwelling on the two final letters of its Hottentot appellative (*gnoooo*), the appearance of a furious old bull is abundantly imposing, and is precisely that of a shaggy black-maned lion. But, as is too often the case, " 'tis distance lends enchantment to the view ;" on nearer inspection the dreadful delusion vanishes, and the imposture becomes as palpable as that practised in days of yore upon the wild beasts, by the ass in the lion's spoils. Whilst crossing the boundless plains of the Vaal river, we had an opportunity of remarking the very similar appearance of the two animals, in twice witnessing the animating but abortive pursuit of a herd of Gnoos, by an enormous Lion, rendered perfectly furious by the qualms of hunger, and still more desperately frantic at the disappointment entailed by the slippery heels of his intended victims, who, on both occasions, left their grim pursuer far behind, puffing and blowing, to grumble over the loss of the morning repast which he had vainly promised himself.

Extremely vicious and pugnacious amongst themselves, and possessed of that swiftness of foot which might be inferred from their compact and vigorous conformation, these ungainly beasts are nevertheless shot from horseback without much difficulty, and can scarcely be pronounced formidable, except in external appearance. The eyes are luring, and expressive of great ferocity: the solid casque of horn by which their beetling brows are overshadowed, greatly heightening their aspect of suspicion and vindictiveness. Like other animals possessing dispositions far more gentle and tractable, the Gnoo is naturally prone to charge in self-defence, when wounded, or forced into a corner; but after fracturing its leg, I have repeatedly driven a reluctant individual up to the waggons, either to escape the trouble of carrying his sirloin, or because I had expended the last bullet in my pouch. In the wild districts bordering on the Colony, where a succession of level plains are traversed by low ranges of bare stony hills, prancing troops, consisting of from fifteen to thirty Gnoos of various sizes, are to be seen engaged in the most wanton frolics, and may easily be hemmed into a valley and compelled to run the gauntlet. At Vogel's valley, north of the Sneeuwbergen, with the thermometer down to 18°, we first secured three shaggy fellows in this fashion, during a heavy fall of snow. Solitary individuals not unfrequently grazed near our drove of oxen, without exhibiting the smallest symptom of uneasiness, and on the arrival of the *cafila* at some scanty pool—perhaps the only *oasis* within many a league—three or four that appeared to be performing the duty of videttes, after executing the most ridiculous capers, and ungainly flourishes, would charge down to the water's edge, as if bent upon disputing to the death, with the thirsty cattle, every drop of so precious an element.

The curious and inquisitive disposition of the Gnoo, often induces the herd to discontinue their giddy gambols, and slowly to approach the passing caravan with an air of laughable defiance, formed in a compact square, goring, menacing, stamping with their slender fore-feet, and at length halting within rifle range to scrutinize the bold intruders upon their lone and hereditary pastures. On such occasions they were readily shot from the waggons, which, upon necessity, could invariably produce from ten to a dozen loaded barrels, in addition to those which encumbered the brawny shoulders of our followers. Although very indifferent marksmen, not one of our Hottentot attendants ever missed an opportunity of warming his flat Chinese nose, by burning a handful of coarse powder under it, through the agency of a rude apparatus of flint and steel. On the line of march, therefore, a quarter of an hour seldom elapsed without the booming of overloaded fire-arms, each volley being instantly followed by a general retreat of every wild quadruped that happened to be within earshot—herds of Gnoos, amongst various other species of game, whisking their long white tails, and scampering off in every direction, but rarely leaving any of their number to attest the accuracy of the practice. During bright moonlight nights, also, curiosity often prompted a *clump* of Gnoos to approach within a few yards of our bivouac, where they would stand for hours in the same position, staring wildly, lashing their dark flanks, and uttering a subdued note resembling the harsh croaking of a frog;—the shadowy aspect they were wont to wear on those occasions being so truly spectral and hobgoblinish, that the stoutest heart might have quailed thereat. Unyoking late one evening near a muddy puddle on the plains of the Vaal river, I shot a noble old bull from the box of the pack waggon, and following it on foot as it limped away, actually inflicted four more gun-shot wounds without realizing the quarry, although from loss of blood it was frequently obliged to sit down. Night closing in, I was fain to return to the camp; but there being no flesh in the larder, I sallied forth again so soon as 'bright Cynthia showed her horns,' and after a tedious moonlight pursuit, was at length enabled to perform the last ceremonies of the chase. A dense fog coming on, the Hottentot, Andries, who accompanied me, contrived to lose his reckoning, and we both wandered about the wilderness during the greater part of the night, encumbered with a load of meat, and more and more puzzled at every step what course to steer; until, towards morning, after losing each other at least a dozen times, the cracking of waggon whips and the reports of musketry, which, owing to the density of the atmosphere, had been transmitted to a very short distance only, fortunately enabled us both to stumble upon the encampment.

The cows, or female Gnoos, seldom produce more than one at a birth; the young calves, which are nevertheless exceeding numerous, being at first of a pure white or cream colour, which gradually assumes a tinge of reddish grey. The latter associate with the herd apeing all the whims and antics of the adults, uttering a nasal murmur, and looking, if possible, still droller deformities than those that gave them birth. We constantly rode them down, as well for the sake of the delicious veal they afforded, as to counteract the shyness of the herd to which they belonged, by inducing the skittish mothers to slacken their baffling pace, and take heed to their offspring. Dismounting from my horse to administer the *coup de grace* to a savage old cow, whose diminutive calf I had previously captured and bound, she charged me upon her knees, distending her flabby nostrils, snorting and bellowing so lustily, that my steed became alarmed; and both my hands being encumbered, at the same time that the clumsily patched sole of my untanned leather buskin became entangled in the stirrup, I fell helpless on my back. Away galloped the horse without further ado, the bellowing of the Gnoo fresh ringing in his ears; and being fully impressed with the belief, that a lion at least, was hanging to his heels, he passed the advancing caravan at speed—his nervousness yet more increased by the yells and shouts of the followers—and dragged me a sufficient distance over the sharp stones, to grind the whole of the clothes, and a very ample portion of the natural covering also, from my lacerated shoulders; lashing out at intervals, to the imminent peril of my teeth, and kicking me very severely upon the knee and ankle, before I could contrive to extricate myself from my very unpleasant position.