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XIV AIGOCERUS ELLIPSIPRYMNUS: - THE WATER BUCK.

PLATE XIV.

AIGOCERUS ELLIPSIPRYMNUS.—THE WATER-BUCK.

Water-bok of the Hollanders. *Phitomok* of the Matabili.

GENERIC CHARACTER.—Adult male four feet six inches high at the withers; nearly nine feet in extreme length. Carriage particularly stately. Figure cervine. Back straight. Neck raking. Horns upwards of thirty inches long, placed almost perpendicularly on the cranium; ponderous, curved forwards, and sometimes rather inwards at the tips, but always diverging from the base; of a whitish green colour; the first third slightly compressed, the other two thirds nearly cylindrical; very strongly and closely annulated along the front and outside, to within six inches of the points, which are jet black. Chaffron intense sepia brown. Forehead, base of horns, and behind the eyes, rufous. A white patch on the throat. Under lip and muzzle white. A white streak before each eye, and a white elliptical band strongly defined, encircling the tail in its upper focus, by passing over the croup, down the posterior face of each hip, and uniting between the thighs. Ears cervine, rounded, and ample—white inside, sepia without. Hide black, and in many parts visible through the hair, the general colour of which is greyish sepia brown, in texture coarse, crisped, and resembling split whalebone; scantier on the body, but on the neck long, white, and reversed, wearing the semblance of a mane. Legs dark brown, muscular, and cervine in appearance. Tail slender, brown, and tasselled at the end like that of the lion—reaching not quite to the hocks. A muzzle. No suborbital indent.

Female precisely similar, but hornless, hind-like, and very feminine. Mammæ two. Gregarious in small herds and families. Found only on, or near, the banks of rivers towards the Tropic, the Limpopo and Mariqua especially.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WATER-BUCK.

"The antler'd monarch of the waste,
Sprung from his heathery couch in haste.
But ere his fleet career he took,
The dew drops from his flanks he shook ;
Like crested leader, proud and high,
Tossed his beamed frontal to the sky ;
A moment gazed adown the dale,
A moment snuffed the tainted gale."

It is not possible for the Indian deer-stalker to contemplate the splendid figure of the rare and majestic Antelope now depicted, without finding himself forcibly reminded of the *Sambur*, or Rusa Stag of the sunny jungles which have so often echoed to the merry crack of his tried and trusty rifle. Whether in size, in carriage, or in general aspect, the *Ellipsiprymnus*, notwithstanding that he is the proprietor of a pair of persistent horns, in lieu of branched and deciduous antlers, yet preserves the closest resemblance to *Cervus Aristotelis* in the 'vaward of his youth,' ere his brawny neck has been bowed by a superincumbent load of ponderous attire. Many a time, when the stately fellow, apeing the style of the 'antlered monarch of the waste,' has sprung from his solitary lair in the deep recesses of the grove—erected his towering front, and tossing his proud head, has waved his great horns to the right and to the left—ay, many a good time, as he nobly shook his shaggy and redundant mane, have I fancied myself transported from the wilds of Southern Africa, back to the Aromatic forests which embosom the cloud-capped mountains of Aboo,* and believed myself again in the lordly presence of a *bonâ fidé* member of the cervine group.

Nowhere to the southward of the Mariqua is the Water-Buck to be met with, nor is he ever found at any great distance from the banks of tropical rivers—abounding chiefly along the margin of the willow-grown Limpopo and her tributaries, in the rippling waters of which he delights to lave his grizzled sides—immersing himself to the chin during the heat of the day, and rolling in his favourite soiling pool for hours together. This addiction to cold bathing, and decided predilection for the vicinage of water, has suggested the appropriate colonial appellation; his specific nomenclature having been derived from the singular and perfect ellipse of milk-white hair, which, like a band of snowy ribbon, encircling the tasselled tail as it dangles from the superior focus, stamps the animal among a thousand. Like the *Sambur*, the hair of both sexes is throughout of so coarse and harsh a texture as to resemble the scrapings of whalebone; that along the throat and back of the neck being chiefly reversed, and of sufficient length to form a complete wiry ruff, which adds, in the male subject especially, not a little to the importance of the *tout ensemble*. The colour and stature are those of the largest ass, but measuring from the hoof to the summit of the attire, the front exceeds seven feet in height, and the lofty tiara of white horn standing almost perpendicularly over such wild brilliant eyes, imparts a presence so commanding, that on first introduction, the animal cannot fail to strike the beholder with admiration.

Without much fear of contradiction, I believe I may affirm myself to be the only European that with his own hand has ever slain a Water-Buck. It was towards the source of the Limpopo, as indicated to me by Dr. Smith,† that the species occurred in the greatest abundance; and in that favoured spot, so well adapted to *wood craft*, I have in the course of a morning's ramble, often met, besides solitary bucks, with so many as five or six herds, consisting each of a dozen of both sexes: some having been even seen swimming across the river within shot of the waggons. Who is disposed to follow me

* A famous hunting ground in Western India, situate on the Northern limits of Guzerat, wherein, during the hot season of 1835, I registered no fewer than *sixty* first rate stags of the *Sambur* or *Cervus Aristotelis*.

† Whilst the Dutch were yet in possession of the colony of the Cape of Storms, a solitary horn from the cranium of this magnificent Antelope, was first imported among a waggon-load of mutilated *spolia* from the wilderness of the interior, and exposed for sale in the market of the colonial metropolis. Ever on the alert to enrich the museums of the mother country, the Government offered a large premium for an entire specimen of the species to which such novel attire pertained, but without success. Nothing more was heard of the animal until Sir Lowry Cole obtained and presented, many years afterwards, to Monsieur Verreaux, the French Naturalist at Cape Town, a skin in so mutilated a condition that its restoration was found to be impracticable; and the merit of introducing a perfect specimen to the observation of the scientific world, was finally reaped by Mr. Steedman, who took with him to London a splendid buck that had been obtained from the country of the Damaras. Shortly before my arrival in the colony, Dr. Smith had returned from his travels into the interior, bringing a beautifully preserved male and female specimen, the *distingué* appearance of which, amid the interesting objects collected during his expedition, did not a little serve to inflame the desire I had previously conceived, of becoming acquainted, in its native wilds, with so rare and eccentric a quadruped.

down the green banks of the lone Limpopo, where the mournful willows, stretching their long arms over the leaf-stained stream, form the most agreeable of canopies? through those shady labyrinths of sweet-smelling mimosas, 'ringing with wood-notes wild' — whose fairy recesses, traversed by paths worn under the nocturnal tramp of Hippopotami, are bedizened with golden blossoms, and festooned with purple pods? From the branches of yonder tree which borders the stream, observe, suspended like a ripening gourd, the basket nest of the pensile grosbeak,* one of the little winged architects sitting snugly below in the porch of its 'tree-rocked cradle,' which with no less industry than ingenuity it has woven of stout threads of the wire-grass.

Mark it well, within, without!
 No tool had he that wrought, no knife to cut,
 No nail to fix, no bodkin to insert,
 No glue to join: his little beak was all:
 And yet how neatly finished! What nice hand,
 With every implement and means of art,
 Could compass such another?

Now from behind the stems of that airy clump of mimosas, is thrust the long red and yellow phiz of an inquisitive Hartebeest, who has presently satisfied *his* suspicions, and cocking his black scut, is sweeping away with the easy motion of a rocking-horse. Ever and anon, as he scours through the grove, there issues from beneath the shelter of some mouldering trunk of drift wood—cast long since by the boiling flood upon the strand, and now matted over with clustering creepers, which hide the decay that works beneath—a troop of pearled Guinea pintados, whose cracked music resembles the grating of a hundred old doors upon their rusty hinges. And see, what strange trail is this? 'Tis the recent and hurried tread of the gallant Water-Buck, broad and rounded at the point—the footsteps left by the ladies of his seraglio, being at once distinguishable from his own by their taper toe, and more feminine proportions. Shy and solitary, the herd, nine in number, must have taken the note of alarm from the hoarse cackle of those querulous birds, and are doubtless hurrying towards the river-brink—their sober colours enabling them to traverse the grove from end to end, without so much as a glimpse of their grey form being obtained. Ay, here is the harbour on which they have been lying for hours undisturbed—it is warm, and by their droppings absolutely tainted like a sheepfold.

Advancing on the tracks, a more extended view of the river has opened upon us, and in that thorny vista, flapping his large round ears, and snuffing restlessly about with wide distended nostrils, behold the wild desert-looking master buck, *in propria persona*, exhibiting all the self-importance of the grand Sultan in his harem. What a picturesque and noble beast it is! One of loftier mien, or more stately and gallant bearing, has never ranged the greenwood; and what a towering pair of horns too! "Aha," he would seem to say, "I told you so—here's the man with a gun"—whereupon, suiting the action to the word, he places himself, like a great leader as he is, at the head of his confiding band. Obedient to the signal, they rush gallantly forward, sweep along the glade in glorious array, dash furiously down the steep bank, and plunge at once right into the flashing waters of the Oori. Hark! how their hard hoofs clatter over the pebbly channel, as the bright ripples spread, and the white spray flies behind them! Already beyond their depth, they are stoutly breasting the current, their wet backs alternately rising on the surface, and again sinking beneath it, as the bubbling waters curl before their slim, but shaggy necks. Again they have found their footing, and one after the other, their stately forms are emerging to view. With that last brave bound, they have each gained the opposite bank, where, facing about for a second, at the verge of the mimosa copse, and shaking the pearly drops from their dripping flanks, they stand majestically at gaze. Now for a steady hand and a true aim—another moment's pause, and, bang! the leaden sphere has spun from the deadly tube;

Hark what loud shouts
 Re-echo through the groves;

The master buck has fallen with his bleeding nose betwixt his knees, and is ploughing up the yellow sand with his great horns;—the savages, yelling with delight, are hurrying, assagai in hand, to despatch the struggling victim;—whilst his bereaved and affrighted does, closely packed, are pressing forward, reeking and steaming, towards the nearest covert!

After crossing the Mariqua, I had been daily looking, with disappointed impatience, for the first glimpse of a Water-Buck, until late one evening, that we halted on the banks of the Bagobone river, in a lone meadow, under a secondary range of the Cashan mountains. Our route had for some hours lain through a forest of ancient trees, some standing stately and dark in their foliage, others riven and blasted by the storm, which had extended their bare arms across the path. But around our solitary bivouac, the scenery was of a wilder and even still more romantic character. On either hand the mountain rose in bold majestic forms, clothed in parts with luxuriant verdure, whilst in others their steep rocky sides were only sparingly besprinkled with light bushes, serving to enliven the rich and varied tints of the broken crags. Rugged cliffs, which margined the gurgling river, shut in the lower prospect, and the great range of the Cashan mountains towering above them in the distance, exhibited their spiry blue crests to eyes which had for months, over the ocean-like surface of the plain, beheld nothing larger than an ant-hill, and seemed almost to rival the Alps in grandeur. Our larder being quite empty, I left the Hottentots engaged in the construction of the usual thorn pound, for the better security of the cattle; and taking my rifle, dived into the unfrequented recesses of the nearest grove, for the purpose of obtaining a supply of wild-flesh. Ere I had proceeded many yards, a stately figure, which I at once recognized to belong to the Water-Buck, emerging with slow and measured pace, placed itself directly across my path, and having received a ball through

† *Loxia pensilis*.

the point of the broad shoulder, sank quietly down upon its haunches, and staggering a few yards, rolled back lifeless into a dry ravine. A lion and his consort, disturbed by the near report of the rifle, bounced meanwhile out of a neighbouring bush, and with an indignant roar, slunk instantly into the jungle. Covering up the much-prized carcase of the defunct quarry with thorn branches, I hastily retraced my steps to the waggons, intending to send out some of the people by torch-light to procure rations; but Piet, who had also narrowly escaped stumbling over a lion couchant in long grass, had already returned, laden with an abundant supply of the flesh of a brindled gnoo, upon which, until a late hour, our followers made merry to the music of roaring *felineæ* engaged on their nocturnal patrol.

At early dawn I proceeded with 'Lingap to the carcase, with the determination of adding the head to my daily increasing collection of trophies; and although the hyænas had been lustily tugging at the branches, they had fortunately not succeeded in obtaining their supper in that quarter. 'Lingap, with an eye to his own interests, proceeding forthwith to cut out the dorsal sinews, which are in great demand for the manufacture of thread, the *mauvaise odeur* that followed the insertion of his assagai almost drove me from the spot. Far from keeping pace with the game exterior, the flesh of this singular species, is uniformly so coarse, carrion-like, and ill-savoured, that even savages are unable to devour it. On our way to rejoin the waggons with the spoils, I added two does to the return of casualties, both well plastered with mud from the river, in which they had been rolling. In their light hornless heads—their raking necks, and taper limbs, the females equally preserve a close resemblance to the hinds of the *Cervus Aristotelis*, and I soon ascertained, that on a tolerable steed, both sexes might be ridden down with little difficulty.

As we advanced towards the tropic of Capricorn, the species waxed more abundant. During several successive days that we hunted over the green valleys which skirt the principal mountain chain, the long white-ringed horns of the bucks, were frequently to be seen through the telescope, raking above ruined stone walls of great extent, the crumbling memorials of 'cities long gone by.' Ere the devastating wars of the ruthless Chaka, followed by those of his successful rival Moselekatsé, had laid waste this lovely country, these enclosures served to confine the countless cattle of prosperous Bechuana tribes, the peaceful proprietors of the soil;—now

"whilst they droop without one arm to save,
Their country blooms a garden and a grave;"

and in place of the once busy throng, we found the deserted areas strewn with mouldering human relics, and overrun with flowering weeds, interspersed with plants of uncultivated tobacco. I had here a ridiculous pedestrian chase after a magnificent buck, that suffered himself to be detected within a dilapidated amphitheatre, under cover of which having approached, I suddenly exhibited myself, and as he rushed by like the wind, lodged a bullet betwixt his ribs. For half an hour, in vain efforts to elude my untiring pursuit, the poor beast scoured over the broken knolls, dodged among ruins, and threaded the intricacies of decaying habitations—his entrails trailing behind him upon the ground; nor was it until I had fairly worn the sole off one of my rude mocassins, that with the assistance of Andries, I at last contrived to secure the fugitive, walking finally barefooted above three miles, to overtake the advancing *cafila*.

But it is at the source of the Limpopo, as I have already said, that the *Ellipsiprymnus* would appear to have established its head-quarters. Arriving there one drizzling morning, a little after the gloomy day had dawned, and almost before it was sufficiently light to observe the sight of a rifle, the booming of one of the Hottentots' overloaded muskets, was followed by a prolonged shout from the successful marksman, '*Here lay de vader bok.*' Hurrying to the spot, we found Mr. Claas exulting over the prostrate carcase of a young buck in the last agonies; but to his disgust, the spoils of this accidental victim being declared not worth the having, we continued our course down the vistas of blossoming mimosas that with other fragrant trees lined the banks of the rapidly widening river. Presently a dark and stately figure was perceived on the opposite shore standing at gaze under the shade of a clump of umbrella-topped acacias—his redundant mane erect, and his beetling brows garnished with a pair of sweeping horns. '*Daar staan een mooi groot bul,*' whispered Piet, joggng my elbow, and cautiously pointing at the same time with his finger. Whilst the noble beast, uncertain what to do, was yet staring at us, dropping upon one knee, I laid my rifle on the rest, and quickly touched the hair trigger; a dull heavy pat followed the report, and the quarry was instantly rolling, hoofs uppermost, on his back, kicking and struggling with all his might. The smoke, curling from the muzzle in thick white wreaths, was kept down by the moist hazy atmosphere; and ere it had floated past, the rascal had resumed three of his legs, and was making off at score, with the fourth swinging from side to side like a pendulum at his shoulder. A full minute had elapsed before Claas, who was behind in a reverie, holding the bridle of my dumpy grey mare, could be aroused by the impatient waving of our caps, accompanied by sundry complimentary *vivd vocé* summonses. That minute appeared to me an hour. Running towards him, and springing upon the back of the mare, I dashed, at the broadest and most shallow part of the river, holding the reloaded rifle high above my head in order to keep it dry: and after much scrambling and floundering, contrived to gain the opposite bank, at the very spot where the quarry, in his struggles, had left a pool of wet blood on the newly disturbed soil. Following the stain, and gazing impatiently down the avenue before me, the drooping form of the wounded buck soon caught my eye, limping painfully through the grove. In went the rowels, and away for dear life, again scampered the three-legged fugitive—long maintaining his place most stoutly in advance of the dappled mare, whose tortoise-like paces were but little accelerated even by the smarting of her gore-stained sides. At length, after excessive toiling and labouring, by a most desperate effort I closed with the tottering victim. Overtaken, he reeled to one side,

and stopping under a bush, made a faint effort to charge as I shuffled past, but being met by a bullet in the chest, stumbled a few paces, and then sank to rise no more.

Right furiously did it pour during the whole operation of divesting the humbled game of its thick robe, which—in many parts quite destitute of hair—shone with a polish falling little short of Warren's jet blacking. Returning, thoroughly drenched, with the spoils packed upon the sluggish pony, I regained the bank of the Limpopo just in time to detect another noble fellow in the very act of taking 'soyle.' Holding his gallant muzzle high in the air, and throwing forward his legs, while he glided stoutly through the current, he was curling the water before his slim neck as from the beak of an ancient galley, and snorting at each breath with his aquatic exertions. Despite of the rain, the first lucky bullet reached his heart, and as he turned over on the surface a lifeless corse, the warm blood welled from the wound, and dyed the ripples round for many a foot. Wheeling in the eddies, and jostling against each abutting rock, the carcass was carried rapidly along with the swelling current, until at length—being brought up by a projecting angle where the mountain, to afford a passage to the stream, divides like the cleft hoof of an antelope—it was dragged on to the shore, and the head having been severed from the body, was thrown across the back of the mare, and with its gory companion, borne into the camp in triumph.



Head of Waterbuck, as preserved by Capt. Harris