XVI. RHINOCEROS AFRICANUS: - THE AFRICAN RHINOCEROS.
PLATE XVI.

RHINOCEROS AFRICANUS.—THE AFRICAN RHINOCEROS.


Generic Character.—Often six feet high at the shoulder, and about thirteen in extreme length. General contour that of gigantic swine. Body very robust, clumsy, and underlimbed; feet very small in proportion, and furnished with three toes; the hocks unnaturally prominent, as though spavined. Head shapeless. Eyes lateral and extremely small; encircled by a series of deeply furrowed wrinkles, extending over a great portion of the face. Muzzle hooked, and resembling that of a tortoise; armed with two horns on the snout, placed one behind the other, over an arch formed by the nasal bones; they are solid, fibrous, consisting of an agglutination of hair, and attached to the skin only; variously fashioned; usually rough at the base, and highly polished above; the anterior from one to two feet long, the posterior generally much smaller, but capricious, attaining in some specimens the same or nearly the same length.* Ears pointed, small, approximated, and fringed with a few bristles. Hide naked, very thick, rugous, and knotty, but destitute of plaits or folds, a few loose wrinkles about the neck excepted. Usual colour olive brown, approaching sometimes to that of clay mire. Tail about two feet long, laterally compressed at the end, and furnished with a few terminal bristles.

Female similar, but smaller. Mammce two. Very common in the interior, and frequently gregarious in small groups not exceeding five or six. Inhabits variously, but is most usually met with on thinly wooded plains.

* In no two specimens of this mixed which came under my observation were the horns built exactly upon the same model. Disease or accident had not unfrequently rendered the anterior horn the shorter of the two.
CHAPTER XVI.

THE AFRICAN RHINOCEROS.

"If you draw your beast in an emblem," observes Peacham quaintly enough, "show a landscape of the country natural to the beast." In accordance with which sound and excellent counsel, although not directly dealing in emblems, I have striven to display annexed the scenery "natural" to the smaller, and more common of the two species of Rhinoceros that infest Southern Africa. He is a swinish, cross-grained, ill-favoured, wallowing brute, with a hide like a rump, an impudent cock of the chin, a ragish leer from out the corner of his eye, a must-begrimed exterior, and a necklace of ticks and horse-flies! Nineteen times out of twenty shall you see the crusty old fellow standing listlessly in the society of Goos, Ganges, and Hartebeasts, upon a plain bounded by a low range of azure hills, and dotted over with mokulas trees, distributed with park-like regularity. In imitation of the pendulum of a Dutch clock, his tail is swinging mechanically from side to side—and the odds are fifty to one that, having eaten his fill, he is at that very moment in the enjoyment of perfect idleness, under the shade cast by one of the many thatched cities of the Zorid which are within the scope of vision. Indolent and slovenly, he would appear, notwithstanding his enormous bulk, to be a slow and dainty feeder, tasting few of the many shrubs which he encounters, or has even touched with his tortoise-like nose, as though designing to browse thereon; and whilst exclusively subsisting upon brushwood and the smaller branches of dwarf trees—he is to be found in none but wooded districts, his traces become there abundant apparent, from his accumulated heaps of ordure, wherein he delights to roll, from his singular trefoil-shaped spoor, and from the extensive mutilations of his favourite bushes.

Whether from a limited sphere of vision, arising from the extraordinary minuteness of the eyes, which, resembling a pig's in expression, are placed nearer to the nose than in most other animals—or whether from an overweening confidence in its own powers—the Rhinoceros will generally suffer itself to be approached within even a few yards, before condescending to take the smallest heed of the foe who is diligently plotting its destruction. At length, pricking its pointed ears at some unusual sound, it listens with a ludicrous assumption of shrewdness—its elevated snout, armed with a double plough hare, imparting an imitable expression of contempt. In an instant the dull and vacant physiognomy has become lighted up with the vivacity and mincing gait of a French dancing master—wheeling presently to the right about to reconnoitre the enemy. Then elevating its double chin, and restlessly rolling its bemired carcase from side to side—it trots forward a few paces with the table expression of contempt. In an instant the dull and vacant physiognomy has become lighted up with the essence of all that is spiteful and malevolent. Twinkling its hogish eyes, and turning its shape less head inquiringly from side to side—and the odds are fifty to one that, having eaten his fill, he is at that very moment in the enjoyment of perfect idleness, under the shade cast by one of the many thatched cities of the Zorid which are within the scope of vision. Indolent and slovenly, he would appear, notwithstanding his enormous bulk, to be a slow and dainty feeder, tasting few of the many shrubs which he encounters, or has even touched with his tortoise-like nose, as though designing to browse thereon; and whilst exclusively subsisting upon brushwood and the smaller branches of dwarf trees—he is to be found in none but wooded districts, his traces become there abundant apparent, from his accumulated heaps of ordure, wherein he delights to roll, from his singular trefoil-shaped spoor, and from the extensive mutilations of his favourite bushes.

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When the Dutch first established themselves at the Cape of Bon Esperance—now nearly two centuries ago, the Zwart Rhinosaar existed in considerable numbers on the present site of Cape Town, along the base of Table Mountain; but within the Colony the species has long ceased to exist, the remnant having instinctively fled before the destructive cannonade to which it was subjected. Gregarious in fives and sixes, they are extremely abundant in the wilds of the interior, and I have, during a single day, counted upwards of sixty. The Hottentotes, ever gnawing at their skill in hunting them, had long kept us on the qui vive, but it was not until we had reached the sodgy Molopo, that the animal's dusky form actually
appeared to me. Whilst the teams were being unyoked, I had gone out on horseback with the design of ministering to the inordinate appetites of a party of savages who had joined us on the road; and was busy in the pursuit of a troop of Hartbeests, when two colossal figures which my friends at once pronounced to be Borili, were described, motionless as statues, in the middle of the level and treedless expanse. I at first endeavoured to approach, frog-fashion, upon all fours, under cover of the grass, but a strong wind setting towards them, they went off at a heavy trot, and as it was getting dark, I re-mounted my horse, and galloping within seventy or eighty yards—the nearest I felt disposed to venture on so short an acquaintance—treated the more bulky to a brace of rifle balls. Carrying his snout close to the ground, he did but run the faster, and by the time I had repeated the dose without any better effect, it had become so dark that I was compelled to abstain from further hostilities.

The next apparition was even more shadowy. Accompanied by a band of natives who volunteered to show me a Giraffe, I had ridden so far in advance of the wagons—then plodding at a funereal pace through the heavy forest that envelopes the foot of Kurichane—that night overtaking me, I began to feel apprehensive of having to bivouac in the bush. My companions evidently contemplated a similar contingency, and evinced a vast longing to rejoin four of their number who had wisely tarried behind with the carcass of a Sassabye that I had inconsiderately shot. Giving by signs to understand that I disapproved of the measure, we pushed on briskly towards the halting ground that had previously been agreed upon. A continuous Rhinoceros was stationed directly in our path, and although repeatedly hailed, most peremptorily refused to make way. There he lay like a sleeping antagonist could not be prevailed upon to surrender to superior weapons, until it had considerably disfigured with the point of the measure, we pushed on briskly towards the halting ground that had previously been agreed upon. A continuous Rhinoceros was stationed directly in our path, and although repeatedly hailed, most peremptorily refused to make way. There he lay like a sleeping giant, as he was tearing up the earth with his ponderous horn. Sneering vindictively and wheezing, he ran off in the direction that we were taking, but presently subsided heavily in the path. We approached him with caution, and were well pleased to find that he was extinct—A volley of musquetry at the same moment in reply to my rifle, together with a bright beacon fire which suddenly blazed forth towards heaven, directing our benighted steps to the encampment.

Arriving at the Marigua several days after this occurrence, we had formed the camp on a verdant spot on the river bank near to an extensive Matabilí kraal—the captain of which, at the head of some ten of his clan, being clamorous for victuals, I willingly placed myself under his guidance, and dived into the heart of the extensive groves, where, although the sun was shining brightly, a dry cutting wind rendered the cold scarcely endurable, even under the defence of a dagga jacket. After running a few hundred yards, the usages, halting, pointed to a huge shapeless mass, which bore some resemblance to a sleeping Rhinoceros, that without asking any questions, I poured through the trees at his indistinct outline, a broad side, which from treble the same distance, would have more than satisfied any other animal in the creation. But notwithstanding that the beast was mortally wounded, he twice contrived to cross the river, and I had no alternative—a cold one though it proved—but to wade after him through water which reached to my middle, following the bloody trail among the tangled covert, the dying monster at length sank upon his knees, when another bullet behind his shoulder terminated his giant struggles, as he was tearing up the earth with his ponderous horn.

A flash like fire within his eye
Shone as he bent or rose to rise;
And then eternal darkness sunk
Through all the palpitating trunk.
Blazed as he bent no more to
A flash like fire within his eye
Shone as he bent or rose to rise;
And then eternal darkness sunk
Through all the palpitating trunk.

My companion the next morning achieved a 'gentle passage of arms' with the very duplicate of this gentleman; but his antagonist could not be prevailed upon to surrender to superior weapons, until it had considerably disfigured with the point of its horn the stock of the rifle employed in its reduction. Arrived from a siesta in a thick bush by the snorting of a gun-shot wound, the exasperated beast carried his human assailant so closely, that Richardson was slain, in self-defence, to discharge the second barrel down its open throat! On our way to the Ooli river, a few days subsequently, having left the wagons to proceed by the direct route, I took a circumcised line to the left, and was ascending a stony eminence, when suddenly discharged by loud shouts and clamour, were followed by the sudden appearance of an infuriated female. Streaming with gore, she rushed over the brow of the hill with snorts and grunts, bounding like a colossal sow—and was actually within pistol shot ere a soul was aware of her advent. No bush presenting itself behind which to hide, I threw my hunting cap to divert her attention, 'Lingap meanwhile striking his shield, and shouting with stentorian lungs until the brute turned off, when I saluted her fat buttocks with the contents of both my barrels, and she was immediately afterwards overthrown by a running fire from the Hottentots.

As we advanced, the species became daily more and more abundant, and I shall hardly gain credence when I assert, that in the valley of Limpopo specimens were so numerous, that on arriving in the afternoon at our new ground, it was no uncommon thing to perceive a dozen horrid muzzles protruded at once from bushes in the immediate vicinity. No sooner were the teams unyoked, than the whole party in the regular routine of business, having assumed their weapons, proceeded to dislodge the enemy, and right staunchly often was the field contested. But where is the quadruped that can stand before the grooved rifle? It will take the conceit out of the most contumacious, and like a sedative, will calm his ruffled temper in a minute. Every individual came in for a share of cold lead and quicksilver; and the stubborn brute that would not quietly withdraw,
satisfied with the mercurial dose he had received, was ultimately budgered to death as a matter of course. Daily almost, two or three were thus annihilated within view of the camp; and not only during our hunting excursions was the path constantly disputed by some rebellious racial, who refused to move on one side until the smarting of his wounds compelled him,—but when on the point of drawing the trigger at some object that I coveted, a scoundrel had frequently leapt with a grunt out of a bush not many yards removed from my elbow. I have elsewhere related, that on the occasion of my first humbling a Giraffe, my advance towards the herd was opposed by a spiteful old vixen, that twinkled her wicked eyes, and with her antiquated little cask, seemed so bent upon interference, that I had no alternative but to direct Piet van Roy to salute her with a blank; a white turban that during the chase was torn by a projecting bough from around my hunting cap, being afterwards charged and trampled under foot by no fewer than three ungracious beasts in concert, whom I could long perceive snorting and whoosing in an abortive attempt to overtake me.

During the time that we were encamped in the valley of the Limpopo, a huge male came sartuming down one evening after we had all returned tired from hunting, and proceeded coolly to take up his position under a spreading tree, not three hundred yards from our wagons. A general move was made towards the guns, which had been slung in their accustomed places within the awning; and Andries, contriving to obtain his rear the first, pompously announced his intention of giving the party a lesson gratis in the art of Rhinoceros shooting. "Jeeg," said he confidently, "daar is die geld ik zal de schaals dood maak." ¶ Impelled by this bold determination, he crept with suitable caution against the wind, taking special care ever to keep the trunk of a tree interposed betwixt himself and the object for whose life he thirsted; and deliberately seating himself at last upon the ground within thirty paces of the unconscious target, he levelled a full minute over a branch, and drew the trigger. The clattering together of the heavy flint and steel was the only response, and the Rhinoceros, quite in the dark as to the cause of a sound so unusual,itched its sharp ears, elevated its snout, and, having sniffed about a little, trotted quietly on to the next tree. The foiled preceptor nimbly advanced to the position that it had vacated, and another minute's aim produced a flash in the pan. Again the beast trotted on, and wheeling short, confronted the adversary, and commenced winking its little eyes in a most ominous manner. Still resolved to learn how a Rhinoceros ought to be slain, not a man interfered, and Andries, having leisurely cleared the ample touch-hole of his blunderbuss with an acacia thorn, and then by the aid thereof inserted a suitable medium of powder, obtained with some difficulty from his gigantic ox-horn magazine—which complex operation occupied other two minutes and a half—levelled for the third time. On this occasion the bullet did leave the tube, and away thundered the irritated animal—the sanguinary sportsman offering large bets that Death would overtake his victim ere it had travelled an hundred yards! But from the top of an eminence we gazed at the dusky figure as it waned smaller and smaller to the perception, now trotting, now galloping over the plain below, until at length it stood stock still, and began browsing upon the bushes; whereupon the preceptor, covered with infamy, having tossed his empty gun over his brawny shoulder, cocked his only optic at his j eering messmates, and acquitted them that the failure of his experiment was solely to be attributed to the infamous quality of the krooi. ¶

Our friend on the other hand, received upon a subsequent occasion rather an awkward lesson in the process by which the Rhinoceros conducts the war against the human species. We were leading the hot trail of a herd of Elephants, and whilst passing a little green knoll, an old lady was perceived scurrying herself under the walls of a deserted stone krah which crowned the summit. Andries had that morning drawn the dappled mare in the lottery; and being in an unusually crusty humour thereat, was resolved to move to the utmost of his poor ability. Dismounting without saying a syllable, and making fast the bridle to a tree, he boldly advanced towards the quarry—which for once in a way appeared to be most peaceably disposed—and cocking his long gun with an air of singular success, triumphantly fired a four-to-the-pound ball into the animal's ribs. Forth she came, brandishing her ploughshare in a towering passion—and whilst not an object appeared in the whole landscape behind which to seek refuge, the mare, having broken her bridle, was trotting quietly away. A pair of tight leathern over takers in a trice, and the rent inflicted in their nether portion by a thrust of the animal's sharp horn, sufficiently proved how nearly we had been bereft ever of the valuable services of our now crest-fallen hero.

One stormy morning, when hunting was altogether out of the question, our little party was on its way to cut out the teeth of sundry elephants that had been slain the preceding day. The road lay under a ruined cattle enclosure, Whence a vicious Rhinoceros, the only tenant, perceiving the difficulty with which we obstructed our feet from the deep black mud—of which several ponds attached themselves at every stop—resolved to take us at a disadvantage. With a grunt and a whistle, out he sauntered accordingly, fully bent upon mischief; and the dansem of the atmosphere causing no less than three out of our four guns to miss fire, the assassin was actually in the middle of us, when a ball from my second barrel fortunately piercing his eye, he fell dead at our feet. Ere many days had elapsed, however, I took my revenge for this set of unprompted aggression upon an unhappy member of the fraternity that I detected asleep in another of these stone enclosures. The walls, which were extremely extensive, had only one outlet, before which having drawn a stiff thorn brunch, and taken post outside, I accused the slumberer by a shot under the left ear. Never shall I forget his amazement.

* Angl. "Ay, I shall reach the target on that very spot!"
† Angl. Choppercock.
Starting upon his legs, he ran with closed eyes full butt against the opposite wall, and finding the masonry harder than his ugly head, made divers uncouth attempts to scramble over, pawing down the loose stones, and in his bursting rage, kicking them backwards and forwards among the wild tobacco plants. A brisk fire from the gateway deterred him from following up any decided attempt in that quarter, although as he raved round and round the enclosure, and flew from one compartment to another, he eyed it perpetually. Bullet after bullet whacked against his devoted ribs, and it being next to impossible to take any aim, no less than twenty-seven had struck the miserable fellow before he finally gave in—his riddled carcase, as well as the foam which had churned around his chops, having by that time assumed a dye of crimson. Fearful indeed was the uproar that attended the division of his mutilated remains—a large party of famished Baquina females, whose wardrobes were even more remarkably slender than usual, rushing forth like so many weird witches, and leaving in the course of a few hours nothing to attest the slaughter, saving a pool of blood!