



XVII. GAZELLA PYGARGA: - THE BONTEBOK.

PLATE XVII.

GAZELLA PYGARGA.—THE BONTEBOK, OR PIED ANTELOPE.

Bontebok of the Dutch Colonists.

GENERIC CHARACTER.—Adult male about three feet ten inches high at the shoulder, and nearly six and a half feet in extreme length. Head long, narrow, and shapeless, with a remarkably broad muzzle. Horns fifteen inches long; black, lyrate, divergent, erect; placed on the summit of the cranium, very robust at their base, with ten or twelve incomplete annuli, broken in the middle, and striated between. A patch of deep chocolate coloured hair at the base of the horns is divided by a narrow white streak, which suddenly widens between the eyes to the whole breadth of the face, down which it passes to the nose. Ears long and reddish. Sides of the head, neck, and flanks, deep purple brown, with a reflected cast of crimson. Back marked with a *saddle* of blueish lilac, highly glazed. Legs from the knee and hock downwards, pure white. Belly and inside of thighs white, and a large white triangular patch on the croup. Tail reaching to the hocks; above white, with a terminal tuft of posteriorly-directed black hairs. A small detached lachrymary perforation. Linear nostrils. Very indistinct muzzle.

Female precisely similar, but on a slighter scale, with more slender horns. Mammæ two; gregarious. Common in the interior, and still found in Zoëtendal's Valley near Cape L'Agulhas.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BONTEBOK.

Lo! where in triumph o'er his boundless plain,
The free-born chief of Lybia loves to reign;
With fires proportion'd to his native sky,
Strength in his arm, and lightning in his eye—
Scours with wild feet his sun-illum'd zone,
The spear, the wild buck, and the woods his own.

UPON the ocean-like and untrodden prairies of the interior—those especially lying south of the Vaal river, of which large tracts are strongly impregnated with saline particles—the incredible numbers of the Pied Antelope here depicted, and of its still gayer congener the Blesbok, that are frequently congregated in the vicinity of the salt flats of the few stagnant pools of brackish water, would seem almost to realize fable. There is in these brilliant herbivorous assemblages something peculiarly wild and striking, and one feels amid such scenes, as though wandering over a new planet. The sky is without a speck—the vast landscape without an undulation. All around bears the original impress of nature untouched by human hand since its first formation. One boundless expanse spread out on every side until it meets the horizon, here and there only is broken by solitary clumps of stately mokaalas, flourishing near some scanty reservoir—the countless variety of wild flowers which blossom spontaneously over tracts of land, otherwise bare and barren, affording in their rich colours, a singular contrast to the uniform sterility of the soil from which they have been called up, as by a touch of the magician's wand.

Advance, and for whole days together the traveller shall see no man, neither shall he hear aught save the strange notes of desert-loving animals—the aboriginal, and often the only inhabitants of the soil. At each step the elegant Korhaan* popping its black top-knot above the grass, rises with hoarse raven-like croaks before the horse's feet, and squeaking forth its monotonous *kirra kirr kac*, again alights a few yards beyond. Vast herds of quaint-looking antelopes, the offspring as it were of a second creation, are everywhere exhibiting their gaudy coats in endless variety of shade and hue. Hundreds are licking up the crystalized efflorescence, over which dances the dazzling and treacherous mirage, whilst large troops in the performance of their complicated manœuvres are absolutely forming, by their incessant tramp, roads which resemble so many well-travelled highways!

Through flowery champaigns roam these joyous creatures
Of many a colour, size and shape—all graceful
In every look, step, attitude, prepared
Even at the shadow of a cloud to vanish,
And leave a solitude where thousands stood
With heads declined, and nibbling eagerly;
As locusts when they light on some new soil
And move no more till they have shorn it bare.

Until we had reached the head-quarters of the Bontebok, in the heart of these great unexplored plains, whereon thousands upon thousands were seen, and numbers daily slain—one small troop near Kapain, and half a dozen stragglers at the foot of the Cashan range, were all that occurred after the first specimens which we met with on the Chooi desert. These latter appeared to have been attracted by an oasis, containing the only moisture that we were fortunate enough to discover on that 'region of emptiness,' after a weary search of six and thirty hours, the greater number of which had been passed by the oxen in the yoke. Throughout, the features of this waste and howling wilderness, were those of a land accursed—

Like burnish'd steel
Glowing, it lay beneath the eye of noon,

exhibiting one dreary expanse which seemed as if it had been for ages consecrated to drought, desolation, and sterility. Bare stony ridges, glaring worse than the heated hills of Pandemonium, crossed the forbidding landscape at long intervals, and the parched earth, rent and seamed with gaping fissures, was devoid of even a single spot of verdure, its scanty vegetation being scorched to one uniform brown. Not a solitary tree raised its sickly head to diminish the aspect of barrenness, and the sun, like a ball of metal at a white heat, blazed over the nakedness.

* Otis Afer. The Florican.

A journey of twenty miles first brought us to Loharon, at which there was said to exist a fair prospect of obtaining water, when that in the bottle, like Hagar's, should be spent; but alas! the only tank in the whole country was completely exhausted, and we dug in the sun-cracked bed to no purpose. The small supply that we had brought in the waggons was barely drinkable even in coffee, yet what were our sufferings compared with those of the unhappy oxen. Although tired to death with so long and sultry a march, they ran frantically in every direction in quest of some pool at which they might slake their burning thirst, making the air resound with their mournful lowings. No alternative presented itself but to travel night and day in search of this necessary of life, and as the sun went down for the second time, and the gloomy night again closed around us without even *one* hour's moon to guide our path, the prospect was indeed most disheartening. At length some horses that we had obtained from our enthusiastic friend Sutton—and which having recently crossed the desert, were fortunately well acquainted with the *locale*—by a singular instinct, suddenly separating themselves from the party, galloped off the road—when, following in the direction they had taken, the screaming of water-fowl sounded like music in our ears, and we had the gratification of finding a small pond of mephitic water. Of this cheering discovery both man and beast appeared to be simultaneously apprised. Water was the universal cry. Rushing to the brink, and throwing themselves on their faces, the Hottentots swallowed large gulps of the impure liquid, indifferent to the crowd of oxen, horses, and sheep, which pressed close upon their heels—whilst the teams in the waggons were with the utmost difficulty restrained until the yokes had been removed, when impatient of their burning thirst, they dashed headlong into the now muddy pool. A dense fog ushered in the following morning, and as it rolled tardily away, disclosed some fifty Bonteboks standing at the water's edge within pistol shot of our camp, but in utter ignorance of our proximity. As the herd scampered off, a volley was sent after it without effect, nor were their numbers sufficient to admit of our way-worn and famished horses overtaking them.

The country through which we travelled, being chiefly characterized by open plains or straggling forests, the Indian deer-stalker will readily comprehend why *wood-craft* availed little in the destruction of game. Many of the wild animals that occur in Southern Africa, are by nature slow and heavy; the gregarious habits of the fleeter,—of which, notwithstanding its clumsy proportions, the Bontebok is one—rendering them so easy of approach *à cheval*, that from the mighty elephant down to the most diminutive antelope, almost every species may be successfully pursued and shot from the saddle. The usually level character of the ground, moreover, is highly favourable to this mode of proceeding, and after galloping to the head of a closely jammed column of Bonteboks, for example, there is ample time to dismount, fire, load, and fire again, before the glittering army has passed,—a fine heavy fellow usually falling to each crack of the rifle. Who shall attempt to describe the sense of buoyancy and exultation that glows within our bosom whilst thus flying at the heels of retreating thousands! Free are we as ourselves, and as the winds that blow over the broad plains that we traverse!

It is sufficiently obvious, then, that the success of a campaign directed against the wild denizens of such a region, must mainly depend upon the number and condition of the horses; but neither is the safety of the party in event of an attack from savage tribes, hanging less upon the same contingency. Scarcely a day elapses, either during which some of the steeds are not pressed into the service for the recovery of straying cattle, and owing to some peculiarity in the Hottentot conformation that ill adapts him for equestrian exercises, in lieu of being

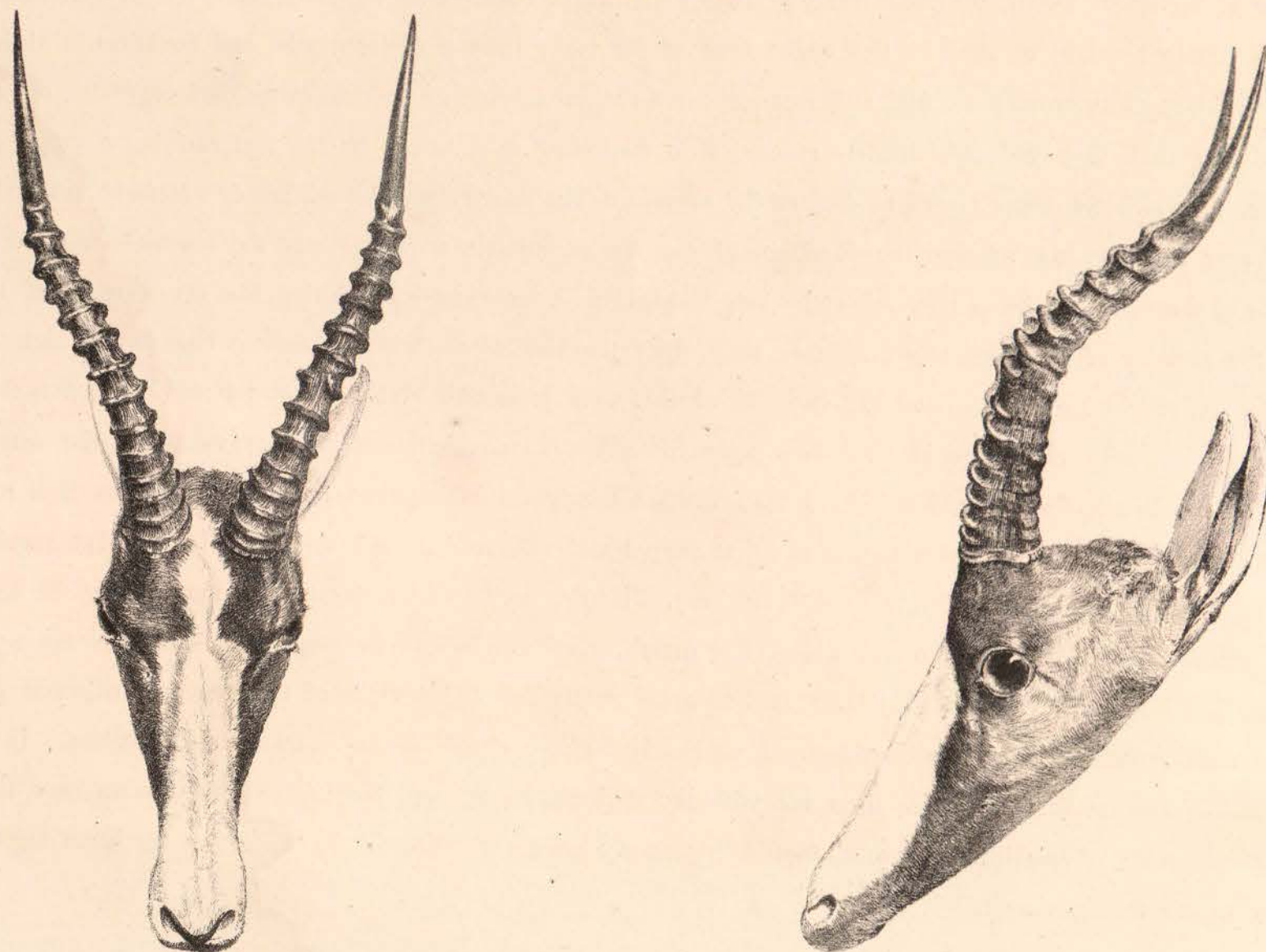
Incorps'd and demi-natur'd
With the brave beast,

whilst “witching the world with noble horsemanship,” he rolls and bumps in the saddle like a sack of pease, and never fails to bring home the palfrey with a galled back. Instead of our sixteen half starved shoeless garrons, with nothing more solid than grass to eat, and not so much even as a cloth to protect their bare ribs from the cold and wet during a long succession of inclement nights, we could therefore have found ample employment for *forty*, with ten waggon loads of grain, and at least an hundred weight of shoes! But whilst none of our many trading advisers, who had doubtless in their time experienced the difficulty of destroying on foot sufficient game for the subsistence of their followers, had suggested our going provided with a better stud, they had unfortunately succeeded in dissuading us from our intention of carrying a supply of the two latter essentials, of which we never ceased to deplore the absence. The anxiety may be estimated, wherewith, as each succeeding day drew near its close, we watched the condition of our meagre hunters after this hard day's work—received the report of one or more of the favourites being “*away*,” and likely to prove food for lions—or, during the construction of the pound designed for the security of the rest, strove to free them from the clusters of bursting *ticks*, which having been contracted among the bushes, sought to rob them of the little blood that they possessed. What would we not have given for a tough little stall-fed Arabian, with abundance of hard flesh upon his ribs? To men circumstanced as we were, the sorriest scrub that was ever ridden in the East, would well have been worth his weight in the purest gold! Nevertheless it is only justice to the manifold merits of the Cape horses to declare, that ragged and rawboned though they be, they do but require feeding to render them the most useful allies during an African foray. Hardy, docile, and enduring, any number may be driven along the line of march by a single Hottentot; and whilst, like camels, they can subsist for weeks together upon the tops of sapless and sunscorched bushes, they are readily habituated to graze unattended within sight of the waggons, wherever grass is to be found—the more restless being simply *knee-haltered*, or shackled like a gipsy's donkey, to limit their rambles. In the chase, the most formidable looking animals inspire them not with the slightest alarm, and the bridle being thrown over their heads, although sometimes guilty of playing the truant, they will generally remain standing in the wilderness for hours together, without attempting to stir from the spot.

Anon it shall be shown that in point of shape and *contour*, the Bontebok and the Blesbok bear to each other the closest resemblance, being equally robust, hunch-backed and broad-nosed, and rejoicing in the same whimsical and fine venerable old goatish expression of countenance. But the species here delineated, is both more soberly clad, and more remarkably skewbald than that which will be hereafter portrayed, the legs being perfectly white from the knee downwards instead of along their inner sides only, and the crupper moreover being marked with a white disc or gusset. The lyrated horns, which are alike placed vertically on the summit of the cranium, are in the Bontebok jet black, whereas they are light brown in the Blesbok; but the two animals possess in common an abrupt snowy blaze down the face, a white belly, a hoary *glazed* back, as if it wore a saddle, and fiery red eyes. Rarely intermixing, the habits of the species are yet precisely similar. They resort to the same localities, are equally addicted to the use of salt, and excepting in certain embarrassed situations, invariably scour against the wind, holding their square noses close to the ground, as though they were running scent.

The Bontebok, or *painted goat*—largest of all the Gazelles—has long ceased to exist within the Colonial limits in those enormous multitudes that are described by early travellers as spreading over the wide plain like a flock of Springboks; but a few are still preserved in the District of Zwellendam, through the potent influence of a penalty of Rix-dollars five hundred, which has been attached to the destruction of a specimen without especial license from Government. Anxious on my return from the Tropic, to ascertain whether the animal thus rigorously protected, differed in any respect from that found in the interior, as pretended by the Colonists, I obtained, through the kindness of Sir Benjamin D'Urban, a formal warrant, duly signed, sealed, and delivered, affecting the lives of some four individuals. Armed with this instrument, we proceeded through *Zoëtendal's Vley*, on our way from Zwellendam to the metropolis, and after having been grossly insulted by a surly Dutch boor named De Toit, than whom no savage could more closely resemble a wild beast, set up our headquarters near the hospitable mansion of Mynheer Oëdendal. Lower down the valley towards Cape L'Agulhas,—that melancholy scene of so many appalling shipwrecks,—lay the extensive estate of Field Commandant Laurens, the merriest old sportsman and most warm-hearted Hollander I have ever met. My writ being duly produced, leave was readily accorded to shoot over these lands, on which were several herds, comprising in all about three hundred head; but they proved the wildest of the wild, and after I had ridden all my horses to a stand, I was fain to confess that to obtain permission to slay a Bontebok, was a far easier business than to turn that permission to account. The following day however old Laurens obligingly came in to my assistance, and first exacted a solemn promise that I would not *inform* against him for becoming an accomplice in the murder without a government license, harnessed a team of frisky young horses to his long travelling wagon, which, besides myself, carried no fewer than four inside and two outside passengers, armed each with a species of swivel. No sooner was a herd perceived making for a particular point—their broad white muzzles raking close to the ground like a pack of fox hounds—than the Field Commandant standing on the coach box, cracked his long whip with an astounding report, and set off at a Dover-mail-pace across the flats to intercept them, taking in his orbit, ploughed fields, dykes, ditches, and embankments, with the most reckless indifference to the probable consequences. As might reasonably have been anticipated, one of the many ginjals exploded, carrying with its contents one half of the brim of a hat, and a very considerable portion of the canvass awning above our heads; but in spite of this untoward disaster, and the subsequent fracture of a trace or two, our forces were so judiciously dropped behind convenient cover, as opportunity served, that the herd, from being puzzled in a corner, became at last fairly *checkmated*. Running ring in an attempt to extricate themselves from this unpleasant dilemma, the *capias* was presently served upon the bodies of three out of the four individuals; and these proved amply sufficient to satisfy not only my curiosity, but my inclination for such sport, so immediately following upon the glorious scenes of the interior, where

"Sorrow it were, and shame, to tell,
The butcher's work that oft befel."



Head of Bontebok, as preserved by Capt. Harris.