



XVIII. AIGOCERUS EQUINA. - THE ROAN ANTELOPE.

PLATE XVIII.

AIGOCERUS EQUINA.—THE ROAN ANTELOPE, OR BASTARD GEMSBOK.

Bastard Gemsbok of the Cape Colonists. *Etak* of the Matabili.

GENERIC CHARACTER.—Adult male about five feet high at the shoulder, and nine in extreme length. General contour exceedingly stout and muscular. Horns very robust, above two feet in length, strongly bent back scimitar-wise, rounded, and nearly parallel; with from twenty-five to thirty prominent rings, more remote as they recede from the orbits, and extending to within about four inches of the points. Face and head hoary black, with a large white streak before and behind each eye, formed of a pencil of long hairs. A white spot between the horns, and a white mouth and muzzle. Ears of asinine dimensions, full fourteen inches in length, pointed, and the tips bent back very eccentrically; of a grey dun colour tipped with black. Tail descending to the hocks; slender, black, and tufted. Hide black. Hair coarse, loose, scant, and undulating; mixed red and white, forming a roan or strawberry. Beneath the throat and neck longer and whiter, and towards the flanks often flea-bitten and clouded with sienna, which colour extends more or less over the lower portions of the legs. Neck furnished with a stiff upright mane, terminating at the withers. Head large and heavy; nose abrupt; mouth extremely wide. A half muzzle. No suborbital sinus.

Female similar, but hornless. Mammæ two. Gregarious in small herds or families, but rare. Inhabits chiefly the elevated ridges about the source of the Vaal and Limpopo rivers.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE ROAN ANTELOPE.

So far was heard the mighty knell
The stag sprung up on Cheviot's Fell,
Spread his broad nostrils to the wind,
Listed before, aside, behind,
Then couched him down beside the hind,
And quaked amid the mountain fern
To hear that sound so dull and stern.

HARK! along the blue mountain's furrowed side the boom of a rifle rolls in prolonged echoes, until at last it has died away in the north like distant thunder! Undisturbed heretofore even by the voice of man, these silent solitudes have reverberated for the first time to the report of his death-dealing engine. Again the stillness of ages has sunk upon the wilderness. The lengthening shadows cast by a few straggling trees have proclaimed the near approach of evening. The sun already painting those distant hill-tops with his parting rays, is flinging his last golden beams over the plain beneath, where the face of nature,

Untouched as yet by any meaner hand
Than His who made it,

is clad in a broad carpet of green, and enamelled with clusters of brilliant wild flowers, that scent the pure air with their varied perfume.

Reader, thou art standing on the elevated downs near the source of the willowed Limpopo, and art looking up one of those lone glades that stretch along the base of the mountains of Cashan.

It is a barren scene and wild,
Where naked cliffs are rudely piled;
But ever and anon between
Lay velvet tufts of loveliest green—

Yon solitary hunter, bronzed and bearded, is advancing with noiseless tread up the shadowed side of that verdant knoll—his body crouched almost to the ground, and his trusty rifle trailing at his side. He has sunk on his hands and knees, and having removed his cap, is stealing upon all fours, and raising his eyes inch by inch above the crest of the ridge. To him nothing is yet visible on the other side, save the scimitar-shaped horns belonging to that sturdy rose-coloured buck, which, shaking, its great piebald head, is idly lying in the grass, flapping its long asinine ears, and whisking its tail to drive away the flies. Ever and anon, however, the glorious fellow looks up as though he suspected treachery, and sniffing about him with expanded nostrils, seems searching for some taint in the atmosphere. Presently a herd of females—his hitherto concealed companions—emerging from a broad ravine, draw closer together, and having gazed around in evident mistrust, begin to put themselves in motion. Springing suddenly upon his feet, and tossing his pied head in defiance, their desert-loving lord canters heavily to the brow of the opposite eminence, and facing quickly about, erects himself to his full and towering proportions; whilst his seraglio, also crowning the hill, and wheeling their ranks behind the flag of their proud leader, stand with curious gaze,—their shadowy forms looming like sculptured monuments on the blue sky line.

The opportunity is favourable to the hunter. Quickly laying his trusty weapon in the crotch of a wooden rest which has hitherto served him as a staff, and setting cautiously the hair-trigger, he directs the heavy barrels at the fair and inviting mark offered by the point of the bull Gemsbok's shoulder. Crash flies the bullet through the hard bone, and away it spins from out of the opposite flank. Many an aged rock around is still ringing to the clangour, as the affrighted herd go racing over the naked slope, forcing with them their crippled chief, who, frequently catching his punctured side—now fast changing from *couleur de rose* to crimson—first pauses a moment in the hollow, then hangs his sick head and follows mournfully in their rear. Reloading, and advancing rapidly upon the blood drops with which the ground is freely bespattered, with fluttering heart the hunter now pauses on the summit of the knoll, and having examined the extent of the damage through a telescope, returns it despondingly to his pocket, and sighs for another hour of daylight. He is far from his wild bivouac—already is the sun below the Western horizon—evening is closing fast—the stars are beginning to peep out; and whilst the dusky mountains are each moment looming larger and larger in the gloom, the first melancholy shriek of a solitary jackal has been quickly responded from the dim valley by the protracted and dreary yell of hundreds. Although the drooping quarry is frequently turning to gaze at its shattered shoulder and bleeding flank, there

is no steed at hand; and the herd keeping a constant eye upon their enemy, to obtain another shot before dark is utterly hopeless. Noting well the spot, and repeatedly looking back in recognition of the various landmarks, the disappointed sportsman at last returns to the foot of the knoll, resumes a bundle of trophies which he has there deposited, shoulders his heavy ordnance, and with a still heavier heart retraces his solitary steps towards his waggons, to the position of which he is guided by a wreath of ascending smoke.

It is morning; and the dawn has scarcely peeped, ere the hunter, elated with new hope, is again wending his way towards the scene of his last evening's vexation. Accompanied by a party of savages and hottentots, he is leading his horse over the same grassy slopes which form a succession of deep valleys, bounded at last by mountains rising in shadowy perspective. Stretched beneath him also in sombre obscurity, lies the wood-clothed river—a grey mist floating over the tops of the trees; and the party, as they advance, brushing off the dew-drops which sparkle like gems on the herbage and flowers, are leaving a broad track behind them. The sun, as he again arises, lighting up in succession each mountain summit which had lately slept in shade, is tinging with prismatic hues the condensed vapours which now hang in white wreaths upon their steep and broken sides; but long after the grey gleam of the river has become apparent, the deep valley through which it winds is reposing under a calm blue shadow. At a little distance from the spot where the Gemsbok was last seen, the party hold a brief consultation over a pool of clotted blood and hair, marking the bed on which the wounded beast has passed a restless night; but the blood is already congealed, and he from whose side it trickled has been gone an hour. Now is the lark rising merrily from the dewy earth, and with a prolonged whistle again lowering herself upon motionless pinions; the azure sky is spotless and beautiful; and every object around wears the most cheerful aspect of liberty and light. Passing over a spur of the mountains which for some time has closed the prospect in advance, the party have entered upon a spacious upland terrace, whereon all animated nature would seem to reign unmolested. The signal being quickly given that man the destroyer is approaching, beasts of various complexions, assembling with snorts and bounds, are flying in every direction; but the eye of the hunter is riveted upon the trail of the one quarry that he covets, and he heeds them not. Slowly, but with certainty, the party advances over the drying sward, scoring out each foot-print in succession; and their doubts, occasioned by the crossing and confusion of hoofs, being relieved at intervals by drops of fresh blood, they are guided at length to a solitary bush in the plain, from beneath the shelter of which the wounded and watchful quarry is disturbed—a disappointed jackal sneaking off in the meantime from beneath an adjacent stone. Crack goes the rifle once more against the roan ribs of the fugitive! In the twinkling of an eye the hunter is in his saddle—another instant and he has closed with the flying victim—and the next, he is gloating over his prostrate prize.

Not less from its singular beauty, than from its extreme rarity, there were few game animals in the whole African catalogue that I more eagerly sought for than the Roan Antelope—my hankering after its gay spoils being moreover greatly increased by the difficulties that I at first experienced in obtaining possession of them. According to indications given by my kind friend Dr. Smith, in whose cabinet I had seen this noble and imposing antelope, it was on an elevated tract of rocky table-land forming a terrace on the mountains between Daniel's Kuil and Kramer's Fontein, that I first disturbed a herd whilst wandering alone in search of them along the "rigging" of the hills. The thin covering of earth supported only a scant and faded vegetation, together with a few scrubby trees and bushes which grew from the fissures of the rock. Surmounted by a pair of jagged ibex-looking horns, the magpie head of a sturdy old bull protruded above a thin copse of brushwood through which I was riding, was not to be mistaken. I sprang from my horse, and as the whole bloom-coloured herd rose to make its rush, sent a bullet spinning betwixt the ribs of their gallant leader. But although—tantalized by an occasional glimpse of his silvery form—I followed the bloody trail over hill and through dale for eleven long hours, desisting only when the sun had gone down and daylight would serve me no longer, I was finally doomed to disappointment through lack of assistance. Not another specimen was seen until we had reached the Limpopo, the elevated tracts lying between which river and the Likwa, divide the principal waters of Southern Africa, and form the peculiar habitat of the *Equina*. Even there, it invariably resides in limited families, which seldom contain more than one old bull—a dozen or more of the younger males usually herding by themselves. Equal in stature to the largest Arab horse,* the whole structure—remarkably powerful

* The *Equina*—largest of Aigoceri yet discovered, not unfrequently attains the height of fifteen hands at the wither. Owing to the asinine dimensions of the ears, and the peculiar curve that they assume, a spectator standing at the distance even of a few yards, might easily be deceived into the belief that the females possess horns as well as the males. If the *Leucophaea* or blue Antelope, said to have been formerly found in the district of Zwellendam, was not in point of fact a mere variety of *Equina*, as I am strongly inclined to suspect,—that species must have passed away and become utterly blotted from the book of life. For the last forty years not an individual has been heard of in Southern Africa; and the only spoils of the animal extant, are lodged in the museum of Paris, whither they are supposed to have been brought from the collection of the Stadtholder of Holland. In the silvery blue grey of this Antelope's coat, when living, is said to have consisted the principal distinction from the species whose portrait is annexed, and this colour is described to have entirely dissipated after death, in consequence of the black skin, over which the long coarse hair is sparingly scattered, fading when dry. I have often observed the silvery appearance in question in the Roan Antelope, whose robe, reflected under particular lights, frequently assumes even a uniform slate colour—the delicate roan-pink or strawberry, which is formed by long loose mixed red and white hair whirling over a sable skin, forming in some of the older subjects, confused clouds and flea-bites, and after death uniformly fading to a dull brown. For a *Leucophaea*, I would have willingly given a finger of my right hand, and it would appear to me highly probable that *two*; but not one of the many natives that I interrogated was aware of the existence of either of these species, and it would appear to me highly probable that the latter, of which no specimen has ever been obtained, had been sketched from the Roan Antelope standing at a distance, when that animal would assume very much the appearance given by the artist to his *Takhaitze*. In this opinion, strongly as it savours of high treason, I am supported by the drawling pronunciation given by the savages to the word '*Etak*', by which title the *Equina* is universally recognized.

and muscular—is especially adapted for traversing the rugged regions that it frequents. Not less vigilant than active, its wary troops were ever most difficult of approach—the bare mountains crowned with wooded terraces that form the stronghold upon which, when disturbed, they invariably sought an asylum, proving alike impracticable to the sportsman, whether equipped in pedestrian or in equestrian order; and some time had elapsed before I accidentally ascertained the species to be so utterly destitute of *foot*—that if detected in the open glades, or among the slightly wooded downs, to which morning and evening they resort, the bulls especially may be ridden down upon an inferior horse in a quarter of a mile! For this singular fact I was the less prepared, from having previously ascertained the speed and bottom of the true Gemsbok,—an animal which is scarcely less heavily built—to be unrivalled among the larger antelopes.

On the day of our first arrival in the valley of the Limpopo, being myself busily engaged in the waggons with the head of a Hartebeest, there arose among the Hottentots, a sudden cry of *daar lope een Bastard Gemsbok*;* and looking forth, I could perceive the cunning fellow's broad roan back gleaming in the evening sun-beams, as he ran through the grazing herd of oxen, and clambered up the steep acclivity. But although I lost not a single moment, he contrived to beat me to a deep chasm, wherein having failed to redeem the trail, the honour of slaying him was reserved for Frederick Dangler, the laziest, but most successful pot-shooter amongst our followers. As this worthy was watching our little flock early the next morning from behind the ambush of an old grey stone lying at the foot of the mountains, the identical individual—easily recognized by a broken horn—reversing the order of things, paid the shepherd a visit, and underwent the penalty of its singular rashness. During the greater part of our journey, it was unfortunately requisite to furnish the Hottentots with ammunition for their self-protection whilst herding the cattle, and their incessant firing, which no remonstrance could control, soon disturbing the whole of the game in our neighbourhood, we generally found it useless to sojourn more than one day at the same place. Compared with the quantity of powder and lead expended by these Nimrods, it must be confessed, that the number of animals they accounted for was extremely limited. Very unlike indeed were their exploits to those of 'Robyn Hoode's brave fellowes in merry Shirewood'

* *Who knew full well in time of neede
To ayne their shaftes aright*—

nevertheless the beasts of the forest having been unmolested all their lives, and quite unaccustomed to the report of the gun, fled before their attacks in such dire consternation, that within a few hours after the formation of the camp in a spot abounding with game, not a single living quadruped was to be seen.

Although said to be very expert in carrying the tracks of wild animals, our people proved themselves far less skilful than Asiatics; but I was happily quite independent of their assistance, having from the commencement of the campaign made it a rule to preserve a cast of the foot-print of every species destroyed. In the secrets of wood-craft, Piet was far better versed than any of his more pretending *confères*, and besides, being possessed of infinitely more nerve, was the only one of the whole clique upon whom I could depend for the least assistance in the field. The rest were always ready enough to go out, that they might obtain a supply of ammunition without the trouble of stealing it, and gain, besides, a plausible pretext for evading their ordinary duties; but their natural indolence extending itself even to their recreations, they never hesitated to abandon me at their convenience, either to solace themselves with a pipe, or to pursue the common description of game which could be circumvented with little exertion. In all subjects connected with tracking, the savages proved far more quick and discerning, but unhappily *they* never accompanied us beyond the carcase of the first large quadruped slain, whereupon having gorged themselves to repletion, they fell fast asleep over the fire. Notwithstanding that the foot-marks of many wild beasts so closely resemble each other, that few European eyes would detect the difference, the African savage, when *fasting* especially, can distinguish them with unerring certainty—poring over all ambiguous impressions until the doubt has been solved to his own satisfaction, and from his intimate acquaintance with every, the most minute, circumstance connected with the habits of each race, rarely failing to estimate with the greatest exactness the length of time that has elapsed since the animal's transit.

We were returning one drizzly morning from the slaughter of sundry Hippopotami, when the fresh *spoor* of a solitary Gemsbok drew our attention upon the wet soil, and presently afterwards a 'pryme bucke' was descried sheltering himself beneath a spreading mimosa—his great lob ears drooping like those of a jackass, and the rain-drops trickling from their extremities. The channel of a ravine favouring my approach, he had but a few seconds to live, and scarcely had he fallen, before the Hottentots ran up to inquire if '*Sir had not seen the Rhinoster?*' Retracing my steps, I then ascertained from the deep trefoil prints in the mud, that whilst I was intent upon my work I had actually passed a few yards only from the nose of one of those animals, without being aware of its hateful presence.

Fifteen noble bucks composed the largest herd of Equinas seen during our expedition, and after following them several hours on foot, without once obtaining a shot, I ascended a lofty hill near the source of the Umpeban, and thence marked them into a shallow ravine carpeted with turf and threading a sequestered valley. Rightly concluding that they proposed to tarry there during the heat of the day, I went back for my horse, and sending a party of savages to urge them gently

* Angl. There goes a Roan Antelope.

down the glen, intercepted the whole in a narrow outlet, and as they galloped heavily past in single file, brought down a buck to each barrel. In that beautiful part of the country lying due south of the Cashan mountains—

Where trees stand singly on the grass
With no low coppice interlaced,

the species was extremely abundant, and scarcely a day elapsed without several herds being seen. Late one evening, whilst the camp was forming, Richardson, who without taking a gun had strolled to a little distance from the waggons, beckoning me to bring my rifle, pointed out a huge blush-coloured bull rolling the pebbles before him as he trotted down a stony descent. A severe flesh wound was inflicted *sur le champ*, but night overtaking me, I was compelled to abandon the trail, resuming it betimes the next morning, only to have the mortification of finding the bones clean picked by vultures and jackals. That same afternoon I set out in the opposite direction, accompanied, at their own request, by some of the Hottentots, who proposed laying in a supply of wild flesh for private consumption; when, outside the ruins of an old kraal, which crowned a little stony tumulus in the middle of a rugged plain, behold! another splendid fellow, the very duplicate of yesterday's, posted like a vidette, and surveying the surrounding landscape. To approach him unobserved, whilst he occupied a position so commanding, was not of course practicable; but being well mounted, and resolving to essay his wind, I contrived, whilst pretending to hold another course, to encroach upon him sufficiently to turn his flank!

Suspicious of my design, the wily quarry presently descended on the opposite side, the same from which I had first observed him. But this was exactly the thing I wanted; and no sooner had his horns disappeared below the brow, than dashing up the eminence, I had the satisfaction of perceiving him—now within three hundred yards—leisurely cantering down to the more level ground. Upon hearing the clatter of hoofs behind him, understanding at once the advantage that I had gained, without turning his head, he laid out over the loose stones, which, whilst he thundered down the broken declivity, flew around his heels as from a catapult. But it was in vain! I had so greatly the foot of the unhappy fugitive, that at every stride the distance between us had visibly diminished, and we had scarcely reached the bottom of the hill, ere his tail was betwixt his legs, his furred tongue lolling out of his open mouth, and his breathing hard and husky. Finding escape impossible, he wheeled with a vicious scream to the charge, his hogged mane seeming even stiffer than usual, and the saliva hanging in white bell-ropes from his muzzle. Now his red eyes glare as, lowering his great horns, and flourishing his tasselled tail, he prepares him for the fight—

Buts at the wind, and with impatient hoof,
Prelude of battle, whirls the earth aloof;
Then gathering all his strength to urge the blow,
Speeds, and darts headlong at his human foe.

But a brace of balls in the chest, while they cooled this impetuosity, so completely disabled the poor beast, that with his strawberry flanks, heaving like a pair of bellows, he stood at bay, unable either to advance or to retreat—nor could I prevail upon myself to administer the *coup de grace* until after I had well admired him. Marked with the figure of a head-stall *sable*, and standing fully as large as the steed that I bestrode, I think I never beheld an object more eccentric or picturesque! Taking my seat upon a bed of wild peppermint which margined a little rill, I there completed a coloured portrait whilst the original was yet living; and no Hottentot still arriving to my assistance, proceeded straightway to decapitate the victim, and making fast the horns on either side of the saddle-bow, I regained the waggons on foot, as the round red sun was setting.



Head of Roan Antelope as preserved by Capt. Harris.