



XXIII. AIGOCERUS NIGER: - THE SABLE ANTELOPE.

PLATE XXIII.

AIGOCERUS NIGER. THE SABLE ANTELOPE.

Undescribed by Naturalists. Unknown to the Matabili.

GENERIC CHARACTER.—Adult male four feet six inches high at the shoulder; nearly nine feet in extreme length. Horns thirty-seven inches over the curve, placed immediately above the eyes; flat, slender, sub-erect, and then strongly bent back scimitar-wise; at first gradually diverging, and then running parallel to each other; three-fourths annulated with about thirty strongly pronounced incomplete rings, more rigid on the edges, but chiefly lost on the outside of the horn; the remaining one-fourth smooth, round, slender, and pointed. Head somewhat attenuated towards the muzzle, and compressed laterally. Carcase robust. Withers elevated. Neck broad and flat. Hoofs black, obtuse, and rather short. Hair close and smooth. General colour of the coat, intense glossy black, with an occasional cast of deep chesnut. A white streak commencing above each eye, and continued by a pencil of long hairs, covers the place of the suborbital pouch, (of which cavity no trace is to be found,) and then runs down the side of the nose to the muzzle, which is entirely white—the same colour pervading the throat and one half of the cheek. Ears ten inches long; narrow, tapering, and pointed; white within, lively chesnut without, with black pencilled tips. A broad half crescent of deeper chesnut at the base of each ear, behind. A small entire sharp black muzzle. A copious standing black mane, somewhat inclined forwards, five and a half inches high, extending from between the ears to the middle of the back. Hair of the throat and neck longer than that of the body. Belly, buttocks, and inside of thighs, pure white. A longitudinal dusky white stripe behind each arm. Fore-legs jet black inside and out, with a tinge of chesnut on and below the knees. Hind-legs black, with a lively chesnut patch at and below the hocks. Tail black; long hair skirting the posterior edge, terminating in a tuft which extends below the hocks.

Female smaller than the male, with smaller but similarly shaped horns. Colour deep chesnut brown, verging upon black. Very rare. Gregarious in small families. Inhabits the great mountain range which threads the eastern portion of the Matabili country.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE SABLE ANTELOPE.

"His beams seemed great, in good proportion led,
Well barred and round, well pearled near his head.
He seemed layre 'tween blacke and berrie brounde,
He seems well led by all the signes I found. * * *
The toes were great, the joynt bones round and short,
The shinne bones large, the dewclawes close in port:
Short ionted was he, hollow-footed eke,
And hart to hunt as any man can seeke."

The Noble Art of Venerie or Hunting.

"AFRICA was justly looked upon by the ancients as the land of Zoological prodigies. It is not possible to open the works of those among them who have treated of the natural productions of the country, without finding some passage in unison with the general opinion of the time, that in this wild quarter of the globe, nature sported even to prodigality, and was profuse of monsters in her chartered libertinism. Her wildernesses formed the principal source whence was drawn the stream of animal life that soaked the Roman Arena, where the cross now towers as if to expiate the deeds of blood done on its site; and from her innumerable wonders, natural as well as unnatural, it passed into a Greek by-word, that she was always producing something new."*

Next to the slaughter of the proud Giraffe, the desire nearest to my heart from the very outset of our campaign against the *Feræ Naturæ* had been to discover something new. Not a new lizard, or a new rat, no, nor even—by which to immortalise myself as a naturalist—a new weasel; but an entirely new something or other, I cared not what, whereupon an humble disciple of the chaste Huntress might reasonably pique himself; some stately quarry whose portrait might not be the least conspicuous in the well-filled gallery of African "beastis of enchase," and whose spoils—unknown to science, and adorning no museum of trophies saving mine own, might fill some prominent niche in halls

"with woodland honours grac'd."

The catalogue of large animals humbled, had already exceeded four hundred head of various sorts and sizes—many of them passing rare and *recherché*—novelties altogether even to the dwellers in the colony; and excepting a few of the smaller antelopes which are restricted to certain portions of the coast that we subsequently proposed to visit on our return to civilization—my collection of *exuviae* had extended to every species of game quadruped known to inhabit the continent south of the Tropic. But "*Africa semper aliquid novi offert*"—the proud trophy that I coveted was yet in abeyance; and the truly splendid addition to the *mammifères* which forms the subject of the portrait annexed, was shortly to be realized,

"To crown our triumph and our toils reward."

My double-barrelled rifle having, under the influence of an evil star, again suffered in a fall with my horse, I took the field on the 13th of December, with a heavy weapon built upon the primitive principle of flint and steel, the which, as a *pis aller*, I had obtained whilst at Litakoo from our kind friend Mr. Moffat. Our whole party, with exception of Piet, who was still laid up with the shot through his leg, were in full pursuit of a wounded elephant on the southern side of the Cashan mountains, when a clump of unusually swarthy looking antelopes attracted observation in an adjacent valley which stretched away at the foot of the steep grassy ridge that we were ascending. One great fellow, evidently the chief, looking as black as an undertaker's mute, and appearing to be covered with long shaggy hair, was standing the nearest, his head and fore-hand only protruded beyond a thick green bush, from a siesta in which, the alarm occasioned by our advent appeared to have disturbed him. Whilst the apathetic Hottentots were pointing, and carelessly inquiring of each other '*vat swart bok is dat?*'† I reconnoitred the group through a pocket telescope, and as they slowly emerged from the covert into the open glade, at a glance convinced myself that they were perfectly new to science. Hastily announcing this fact, together with my determination

* Quarterly Review, No. cxxvii., p. 189.

† What black buck is that?

of pursuing them, if requisite, to the world's end—my heart thumping like a sledge hammer, I dashed down the slope, followed by the derision of all the Hottentots for my unsportsman-like desertion of the trail of a wounded *olifant*, in favour of a *lelyk*, or *ugly*, buck, one specimen of which, I assured them in reply, I would rather possess than all the ivory in Africa! In an instant I was in the middle of the herd, which was then crossing the valley. All had scimitar-shaped horns—nine chesnut coloured does leading, and two superb coal-black and tan bucks, whose sable coats vied in depth with the team of a hearse, bringing up the rear in Indian file, with all the pomposity and self-importance of village billy-goats, to which, although some five times superior in stature, they appear to bear considerable resemblance in general *contour*. Dismounting, and drawing the bridle over my horse's head, I was delighted to observe the funeral procession stand for a few seconds within fifty yards, and as if unable to account for so sudden an intrusion, stare at me with amazement. No opportunity could have been more favourable, and properly equipped, I *must* have secured a brace at least; but in vain was it that I pulled the trigger of my clumsy artillery at the fellow who carried the finest head. Three several times did the heavy machinery of the lock descend with alarming vehemence, but no report following the clattering concussion; and the herd having in the mean time taken the hint, and clambered up the face of a steep hill, I fairly rode my horse to a stand, in a desperate, but hopeless, attempt to overtake them. Cursing my hard fate as I dashed the treacherous weapon to the ground, I planted a stick at the last *spoor* left by the troop, as it disappeared over the stony brow, and hastening to the waggons, devoted half an hour to the splicing of my broken rifle—being armed with which, and mounted upon my freshest steed, I returned with my companion to the scene of discomfiture. Taking up the foot-marks, we followed them among the hills with unwearied perseverance during the residue of that luckless day—the shadows shifting, the sun setting, and night finally casting her murky mantle around us, without our having retrieved the object of our search. Being still within reach of the camp, we marked the spot where the tracks had been relinquished, and returned home with the determination of resuming them on the morrow—the near view I had obtained of the magnificent quarry having, if possible, strengthened my previously formed resolution never to relinquish the pursuit until I had succeeded.

Scarcely one wink did I sleep during the whole of that tedious night. Visions of strange unearthly looking beasts, as inconstant in their exterior as the changeable cameleon, appeared in quick succession during my broken dozings, but uniformly vanished upon pursuit like the *ignis fatuus*. Alone and bewildered in the bosom of pathless mountains, I found myself at one moment wandering up and down, seeking vainly to recover the lost track of some double headed monster disguised in widow's weeds, that like an eel had slipped through my fingers when I fancied I was most sure of him; at the next I was straining every muscle in an abortive attempt to draw the unyielding trigger of an obstinate blunderbuss—the giant hobgoblin at whose carcase the tube was levelled, waxing momentarily larger, and blacker, and more shaggy, until, presuming upon the harmless nature of my rebellious weapon,—which, when it at last exploded spontaneously, proved to have been loaded without a bullet—he finally strutted up like a great bully, and kicked me over a precipice into the yawning abyss below. Then came a sudden start to terminate my unpleasant bumping, and behold! it was a dream. At length the irksome shadows of night beginning to dissipate,

—“Ere yet the morning peep
Of stars retire from the first blush of day,”

our eager feet are again in the stirrup. Resuming the tracks the moment it was light enough to *read* the ground whereon we trode, again did we carry them during the live-long day over hills and through valleys—now casting about at fault, now hurrying on upon the hot trail—but still without obtaining so much even as a distant glimpse of the gem for which we panted. More than once we came upon the spot where, under the shade of some projecting crag, the roaming herd had sojourned for an hour during the heat of the day; and the foot-prints became then so fresh that they were for a time abandoned, and a cast made a-head in the hope of viewing the quarry in the very next valley. All other game, how much coveted soever under ordinary circumstances, was suffered to pass unheeded. Sometimes a solitary bull Koodoo, carrying a noble head, would lay his corkscrew horns along his grey shoulders, burst through the brake, and bring our hearts into our mouths; yet was he permitted to proceed unmolested. Repeatedly, too, the *spoor* had been crossed either by a Water-Buck, or by a Roan Antelope, both of which animals were observed in unusual abundance—their spot so closely resembling that of the new species, that much valuable time was invariably lost in deciding which was the true one—the Matabili, who had not been present when the herd was first viewed, cunningly availing themselves of each check to assure me that the chase was no other than *Etak** hoping that I might be thus tempted to discontinue the to them wearisome pursuit. But the day had ended before it would appear to me to have commenced; and this second night closing when we were far from the encampment, we lighted a fire, and made ourselves snug under a projecting ledge of rock near the summit of a spur from the great range.

During the early part of the night there was no moon, but the stars shone out in brightness and beauty upon a dark blue sky, whilst the nocturnal sounds peculiar to such savage solitudes were ever and anon wafted to our ears. The wind as it moaned dismally by in fitful gusts, sounded at times like the measured tramp of a hundred elephants marching across the opposite hill; then all was silent as the tomb, until the startling *who-ooop* of the fetid hyena, or the discordant baying of a troop of hungry jackals, burst from the gloom like spirit-warnings from the past. Again the stealthy foot-fall of some carnivorous prowler might be heard approaching the spot on which we lay, and once more all would become hushed at the indis-

* The Roan Antelope.

tinct and lurid gleam cast upon the surrounding bushes by our watch-fire, as we heaped on the dry wood. At length

"Like a queen came forth the lovely moon
From the slow opening curtain of the clouds,
Walking in beauty to her midnight throne;"

and after a sound sleep of some hours, "the bright morning star, day's harbinger," shooting above the dark brow of the mountain range to the eastward, was speedily followed by the white glimmering of dawn. Seizing our rifles we at once quitted this lone bivouac, and descending towards the valley, passed over one of our battle-fields, whereon lay the mortal remains of three huge elephants and a rhinoceros, whose white bones, bleached by the sun and shower, showed in the twilight, through the black, shroud-like shrivelled skin, by which the skeletons were partially enveloped. Once more the sun has risen, but the air is still misty and chill. Again he touches each mountain peak successively with fiery light, whilst the lower range, including the deep valleys at its foot, are yet shadowy and undefined. Every minute now produces a change in the face of the landscape, and every change is more beautiful than the last. To the westward alone, all is veiled under cloud, which the eye vainly attempts to penetrate, unless when partial openings in the sweeping curtain afford glimpses of cliff or forest, whose rainbow hues, sunny and soft, are scarcely more substantial than the gauze-like vapour which is again closing its fleecy folds around them. As the red orb mounts upwards, these mists bow before his power, still however lingering about the craggy summits as though reluctant to quit their old resting place, until, curling up one by one into the calm blue sky, they gradually melt away into thin air. And now the last wreath has disappeared, and we are looking forth upon a boundless and savage expanse of grey mountains and ravines, far below which the sinuous course of the river can be traced by the bordering of trees that shelter and conceal it.

Towards noon of this, the third day, the hoof-marks of the herd denoted its having divided into packs, and it became evident that we were fast closing with the fugitives. Following upon the largest track, and peeping cautiously over a rocky eminence, our laudable assiduity was in half an hour more rewarded by the gratifying sight of the two bucks, clad in their "black attire," like the chief mourner at a funeral, and grazing by themselves, quite unconscious of our approach, in a stony valley some five or six hundred yards in advance! I was the first to make the discovery, and my sensations, as I quickly withdrew my head to whisper to my companion, "There they stand," were positively sickening—for although at last fortunately found, the quarry had yet to be secured. Fresh caps were instantly applied to our own rifles, while the Hottentots renewed their damp priming, and wiped their clumsy gunflints. One moment's consultation sufficed so to dispose our forces, as to afford the best chance of intercepting the game from a tangled labyrinth of ravines which terminated in an impenetrable defile. A simultaneous equestrian attack from different quarters was then directed against the handsomer of the two, the order being given

"Whoever meets him, shoot him dead,
Five hundred nobles on his head."

Bang, bang, bang,—went the rifles, and in an instant, with one hind leg dangling from the hip, the cripple had dashed into a scrub of flowering *proteas*, above the gay blossoms of which his sweeping horns alone were visible. Pressing him on horseback through the copse, he broke within a few yards of me, when another shot through his body laid him sprawling on his black side. Quickly recovering himself, however, he was again on his feet, and before any one had reloaded, was making the best of his way towards the defile at the neck of the valley. Aware that if he once gained this covert, he was lost to me and my heirs for ever—without waiting to drive the bullets down my rifle, I sprang into the saddle, and exhorting Andries to follow upon the mare instead of stopping to reload, crammed in the rowels, and dashed after the fugitive. I have before remarked, that the genus *Antelope* should have been created with three instead of four legs, inasmuch as they invariably appear to run faster upon the odd, than upon the even number; and here was indeed a case in point. Although upon the first discovery of the herd on the morning of the 13th, I had made my way into the middle of them almost without an effort, it was now with the utmost difficulty that I could even preserve my place. Swinging his tasseled tail from side to side without one symptom of distress, and squinting at me occasionally over his swarthy shoulder, as if to say, "*Pray catch me if you can*," the wounded quarry rattled gallantly along over broken ground, beset with buffalo-holes, and strewn with pointed stones. Fast gaining the jungle, he appeared to be gaining heart also, as each stride brought him nearer and nearer to his citadel; but at the termination of a mile, when close at home, a yawning nullah arresting his career, he was compelled to swerve. During the progress of the chase to this point, my sore galloway had twice kissed the ground, but twice cleverly recovered himself, after I had laid my account for a severe fall. Clearing the obstacle now presented at a bound, he brought me well on the quarter of the prize, which, little inferior to himself in stature, faced instantly about, lowered his great horns, and charged. Ramming down the balls as I retreated, I presently approached again. Again he tilted at me, and receiving both shots through the shoulder, was overthrown and slain!

Vain were it to attempt a description of my sensation, when thus, after three days of toilsome tracking and feverish anxiety, unalleviated by almost any incident that could inspire confidence, or even hope of ultimate success, I at length found myself actually standing over the prostrate carcase of so brilliant an addition to the catalogue of game quadrupeds—so bright a jewel amid the riches of Zoology! Turning it over and over, I thought I could never have scanned the prize sufficiently, and my companion, after long feasting his eyes in silence, exclaimed, that "the sable antelope would doubtless become the admiration of the world!" A minute description was written with its own red blood, and a portrait having been

completed on the spot, while the victim was still warm, the *spolia* were carefully removed, and conveyed upon a pack-horse to the waggons,—the night which succeeded to that most fortunate day of the whole campaign—my last in the bonny mountains of Cashan—being passed in preparing the skin for the long journey that was before us. After having been thoroughly salted, it was folded up and enclosed in an empty meal-bag—a place being allotted to it at the foot of my bed, which it occupied during the greater portion of our return pilgrimage. A highly unenviable bed-fellow, and a source of perpetual anxiety, it finally reached Cape Town in a state of the highest preservation; and having been elegantly set up by Monsieur Verreaux, the French Naturalist, now graces the collection of the British Museum.

From the very first glimpse I had been thoroughly persuaded that the sable antelope would prove to be a member of the Aigocerine group, nor was I mistaken in my conjecture. Nearly equal in stature to the *Equina*, it appeared in point of general *contour* to be more closely allied to that splendored species than to any other with which we are yet acquainted. The horns, upwards of three feet in length and perfectly flat, swept gracefully over the back in the form of a crescent—a bushy black mane rising behind them, and extending betwixt the lively chestnut coloured ears to the middle of the back. The tail—both tasseled and fringed—resembled that of no other known Antelope; and the glossy jet black hue of the greater portion of the coat, whilst it formed a most vivid and remarkable contrast with the snowy whiteness of the lower parts, imparted the appearance of a suit of the deepest mourning. During my first interview, I had ample opportunity of remarking, that the females, like their lords, were all provided with scimitar shaped horns; and although somewhat smaller in stature, that they were similarly marked—a deep chesnut brown, verging upon black, taking the place of the intense sable and tan. Judging from the compact form of the hoof, the *habitat* of the species should be limited to hilly districts; and it seems probable from many circumstances, that the herd from which my specimen was obtained, had wandered to the spot in which we found it, from mountains lying to the northward and eastward, which may perhaps form their head-quarters. Be this as it may, by none of the natives within our reach was the animal recognised—although some, to conceal their ignorance, pronounced it to be *kookaama*, which in the Sichuana dialect signifies the oryx or true gemsbok—an animal of such extremely rare occurrence within Moselekatse's country, that they had in all probability never even seen one.

On our return to Graham's Town, several months after the realization of the new Antelope, I sought the trader Scoon, who had given us many valuable hints connected with the expedition now so successfully terminated. The poor fellow was confined to his bed with an acute attack of rheumatism, which he had contracted during his last *smouching** journey to Litakoo; and mistaking me at first for one of his hard hearted creditors, my visit naturally enough appeared to afford him anything but pleasure. "You hae seen," said he, after several uneasy allusions to the crippled state both of his frame and finances, "You hae seen the twa gentlefolks, Sir, wha cam last oot o' Sillekat's land? I canna for the vary life o' me think on their names. Sure one was a Captun Harrison, or some Captun or anither o' the Indy Company's army, and he had wi' him Sir William Richards, the Juidge, or I'm sair mistaen. Its noo mair nor a twalmouth syne, Sir. They cam up frae the Bay wi' auld Mathew's lang waggin, on their road oot to pit a muckle top-coat on the black shoulders o' that naked cairl Sillekat; and noo I'm tell't they're coom back into the toon." "You probably allude to myself," I returned, "and to my fellow-traveller, Mr. Richardson, whom you were so good as to visit at Parke's Hotel." "Eh, Captun Harrison," he exclaimed, snatching from off his head the foot of old stocking, which was doing duty for a night-cap, at the same time that he extended his bony hand, "an' is it yoursel? aweel I thocht ye was Mither Smeeth. I'm varry glad to see ye safe returned again, Sir, frae amang a' thae cut-throat kafirs; an Sir William, too,"—taking a pinch of snuff with renewed confidence—"I hope he's uncommon hearty. Andhries has been tellin' me, Sir, that ye hae brought doon in the waggin wi' ye that unco fine Black Boke† that I made sartain wad hae been the makin' o' ma fortune ane o' thae days, whan the rheumatiz had left me ould banes. Ech, Sirs, that's aye the gait; them that has mair siller nor they ken what to do wi', are sure to hae a' the luck, and them puir deevils that's starvin' o' want, is everlastingly unfortnit. Why, Sir, its twa year syne, that I was huntin' o' yeelephants in thae same muntains, whan I foregathered wi' thae varry troep o' bonnie bokes, wi' that yaedential black spunkie that I'm tell't ye've felled, an' rale keen to be sure I was to hae fired amaingst them; but thae Hottentot loons—ye ken the obstinit and thrawn natur o' them—they wad hear o' nathing o' the sort. I wad na say ma heed was ma ain whan a bul yeelifant was a-fit; and as it turned oot, the loons lost the

* Itinerant traders in the colony are not inappropriately termed "smouches."

† Two domestic Dutch farmers excepted,—who had positively never crossed the Colonial boundary, and neither of whom had in all probability seen such of Africa beyond the limits of his own estate,—Scoon is the only man, who, so far as I am aware, has laid claim to acquaintance with the Sable Antelope, prior to my introducing it. No soul on earth ever breathed to me of the existence of a still undiscovered species, before I had found it: yet are there never wanting abundance of envious persons who seek to solace their own disappointment by endeavouring to depreciate the success of the more fortunate or the more persevering. Letters that I have lately received, assure me that in my native land the larger portion of the merit due to my discovery has been awarded to Dr. Andrew Smith, who is stated to have apprized me of the existence of the animal, and directed my attention to where it might be found. I have never failed to acknowledge my lasting obligations to that distinguished Naturalist for the liberal and friendly information which he afforded me at Cape Town; and should this paragraph ever meet his eye, I feel confident that he will bear me out in the assertion, that during the many conversations wherewith he favoured me regarding the wild denizens of Southern Africa, he never in the most remote manner hinted at the existence of the species in question. I twice wrote to the worthy Doctor after my return, giving a description of my prize, and requesting that he would name it; but he had sailed for Europe, and many thousand miles intervening betwixt us, I bestowed the name it now bears, in consultation with Monsieur Verreaux. In the first edition of my Narrative, *Aigocerus Niger (Harrisii)* was, by an error in the press, converted into *A. Harrisii*, whence my well-wishers have done me the favour to insinuate that I vauntingly christened it after myself. Unfortunately, however, for their veracity in this instance also, the animal is to be found under its correct nomenclature in the second volume of the Transactions of the Zoological Society, my published communication to which work, it will be seen, was made no less than twelve months prior to the appearance of my Narrative.

ivory, an I let ma guid fortin slip atween ma fingers. The *flees* played the mischief wi' ma oxes, or ma certie I'd hae lookit oop the black deevil aince mair in the Morl muntains that lies ower agin the tither side o' Sillekat's; but bad luck to thae stupid Hottentots, I was forced to coom awa wiout him."

"And we should have come away without him too," I replied, "had we listened to what the Hottentots had to say upon the subject; but from the moment I first obtained a glimpse of that buck, I swore that he should die. All the flies in the Murál should never have driven me out of those hills without his black hide; and had we not obtained it as we did,—instead of now talking about him to you at Graham's Town, I should at this very moment have been still upon his trail."



Head of Black Antelope as preserved in the British Museum.