

A description of the two albinos of Europe, (one twenty-one, the other twenty-four years of age) / extracted from M. Saussure's 'Journey to the Alps,' in the year 1785.

Contributors

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Wellcome Collection
183 Euston Road
London NW1 2BE UK
T +44 (0)20 7611 8722
E library@wellcomecollection.org
<https://wellcomecollection.org>

A
DESCRIPTION
OF THE TWO
ALBINOS OF EUROPE,

(One Twenty-one, the other Twenty-four Years of Age),

EXTRACTED FROM
M. SAUSSURE'S JOURNEY TO THE ALPS,
IN THE YEAR 1785,

AND NOW PUBLISHED IN THE
ENCYCLOPÆDIA BRITANNICA.

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DESCRIPTION, &c.

ALBINOS is the name by which the Portuguese call the white Moors, who are looked upon by the negroes as monsters. They at a distance might be taken for Europeans; but, when you come near them, their white colour appears like that of persons affected with a leprosy.

In Sauffure's *Voyages dans les Alpes*, is the following account of two boys at Chamouni, who have been called *Albinos*. "The elder, who was, at the end of the year 1785, about twenty or one and twenty years of age, had a dull look,

with lips somewhat thick, but nothing else in his features to distinguish him from other people. The other, who is two years younger, is rather a more agreeable figure: he is gay and sprightly, and seems not to want wit. But their eyes are not blue; the iris is of a very distinct rose colour: the pupil too, when viewed in the light, seems decidedly red; which seems to demonstrate, that the interior membranes are deprived of the uvea, and of that black mucous matter that should line them. Their hair, their eye-brows, and eye-lashes, the down upon their skin, were all, in their infancy, of the most perfect milk white colour, and very fine; but their hair is now of a reddish cast, and has grown pretty strong. Their sight too is somewhat strengthened; though they exaggerate to strangers their aversion for the light, and half shut the eye-lids, to give themselves a more extraordinary appearance. But those who, like me, have seen them in their infancy, before they were tutored to this deceit, and when too few people came to Chamouni to make this affectation profitable to them, can attest that then they were not very much offended

fended with the light of the day. At that time they were so little desirous of exciting the curiosity of strangers, that they hid themselves to avoid such ; and it was necessary to do a sort of violence to them, before they could be prevailed on to allow themselves to be inspected. It is also well known at Chamouni, that when they were of a proper age, they were unable to tend the cattle like the other children at the same age ; and that one of their uncles maintained them out of charity, at a time of life when others were capable of gaining a subsistence by their labour.

“ I am therefore of opinion, that we may consider these two lads as true Albinos ; for if they have not the thick lips and flat noses of the white negroes, it is because they are Albinos of Europe, not of Africa. This infirmity affects the eyes, the complexion, and the colour of the hair ; it even diminishes the strength, but does not alter the conformation of the features. Besides, there are certainly in this malady various degrees : some may have less strength, and be less able to endure the light ; but these circum-

circumstances in those of Chamouni, are marked with characters sufficiently strong to entitle them to the unhappy advantage of being classed with that variety of the human species denominated Albinos.

“When nature presents the same appearance often, and with circumstances varied, we may at last discover some general law, or some relation which that appearance has with known causes; but when a fact is so singular and so rare as that of those Albinos, it gives but little scope to conjectures; and it is very difficult to verify those by which we attempt to explain it.

“I at first imagined that this disease might be referred to a particular sort of organic debility; that a relaxation of the lymphatic vessels within the eye might suffer the globules of the blood to enter too abundantly into the iris, the uvea, and even into the retina, which might occasion the redness of the iris and of the pupil. The same debility seemed also to account for the intolerance of the light, and for the whiteness of the hair.

“But

“ But a learned physiologist, M. Blumenbach, professor in the university at Gottingen, who has made many profound observations on the organs of sight, and has considered with great attention the Albinos of Chamouni, attributes their infirmity to a different cause.

“ The study of comparative anatomy has furnished him with frequent opportunities of observing this phenomenon ; he has found it in brutes, in white dogs, and in owls ; he says it is generally to be seen in the warm-blooded animals ; but that he has never met with it in those with cold blood.

“ From his observations, he is of opinion, that the redness of the iris, and of the other internal parts of the eye, as well as the extreme sensibility that accompanies this redness, is owing to the total privation of that brown or blackish mucus, that, about the fifth week after conception, covers all the interior parts of the eye in its sound state. He observes, that Simon Pontius, in his treatise *de Coloribus Oculorum*, long ago remarked, that in blue
eyes

eyes the interior membranes were less abundantly provided with this black mucus, and were therefore more sensible to the action of light. This sensibility of blue eyes agrees very well, says M. Blumenbach, with Northern people, during their long twilight; while, on the contrary, the deep black in the eyes of negroes enables them to support the splendor of the sun's beam in the torrid zone.

“ As to the connection between this red colour of the eyes and the whiteness of the skin and hair, the same learned physiologist says, that it is owing to a similarity of structure, *consensus ex similitudine fabricæ*. He asserts, that this black mucus is formed only in the delicate cellular substance, which has numerous blood-vessels contiguous to it, but contains no fat; like the inside of the eye, the skin of negroes, the spotted palate of several domestic animals, &c. And, lastly, he says, that the colour of the hair generally corresponds with that of the iris. *Gazette litt. de Gotingue*, Oct. 1784.

“ At

“ At the very time that M. Blumenbach was reading this memoir to the Royal Society of Gottingen, M. Buzzi, surgeon to the hospital at Milan, an eleve of the celebrated anatomist Moscati, published in the *Opuscoli Scelti de Milan*, 1784, t. vii. p. 11. a very interesting memoir, in which he demonstrates, by dissection, what Blumenbach had only supposed,

“ A peasant, of about thirty years of age, died at the hospital of Milan, of a pulmonary disorder. His body, being exposed to view, was exceedingly remarkable by the uncommon whiteness of the skin, of the hair, of the beard, and of all the other covered parts of the body. M. Buzzi, who had long desired an opportunity of dissecting such a subject, immediately seized upon this. He found the iris of the eyes perfectly white, and the pupil of a rose colour. The eyes were dissected with the greatest possible care, and were found entirely destitute of that black membrane which anatomists call the *uvea* ; it was not to be seen either behind the iris, or under the retina ;
within

within the eye there was only found the choroid coat extremely thin and tinged of a pale red colour by vessels filled with discoloured blood. What was more extraordinary, the skin, when detached from different parts of the body, seemed also entirely divested of the *rete mucosum*; maceration did not discover the least vestige of this, not even in the wrinkles of the abdomen, where it is most abundant, and most visible.

“ M. Buzzi likewise accounts for the whiteness of the skin and of the hair, from the absence of the *rete mucosum*, which, according to him, gives the colour to the cuticle, and to the hairs that are scattered over it. Among other proofs of this opinion, he alleges a well-known fact, that if the skin of the blackest horse be accidentally destroyed in any part of the body, the hairs that afterwards grow on that part are always white, because the *rete mucosum* which tinges those hairs is never regenerated with the skin.

“ The

“ The proximate cause of the whiteness of Albinos, and the colour of their eyes, seems therefore pretty evidently to depend on the absence of the *rete mucosum* : But what is the remote cause ?

“ In the first place, it seems probable that men affected with this infirmity, form no distinct species, for they are produced from parents that have dark skins and black eyes. What is it then that destroys the *rete mucosum* in such persons ? M. Buzzi relates a singular fact, which seems to throw some light on this subject.

“ A woman of Milan, named Calcagni, had seven sons ; the two eldest had brown hair and black eyes ; the three next had white skins, white hair, and red eyes ; the two last resembled the two eldest. It was said that this woman, during the three pregnancies that produced the Albinos, had a continual and immoderate appetite for milk, which she took in great quantities ; but that when she was with child of the other four children, she had no
such

such desire. It is not however ascertained, that this preternatural appetite was not itself the effect of a certain heat, or internal disease, which destroyed the *rete mucosum* in the children before they were born.

“ The Albinos of Chamouni are also the offspring of parents with dark skins and black eyes. They have three sisters by the same father and mother, who are also brunettes. One of them that I saw had the eyes of a dark brown, and the hair almost black. They are said, however, to be all afflicted with a weakness of sight. When the lads are married, it will be curious to observe how the eyes of their children will be formed. The experiment would be particularly decisive, if they were married to women like themselves. But this faulty conformation seems to be more rare among women than among men; for the four of Milan, the two of Chamouni, the one described by Mauperitus, the one by Helvetius, and almost all the instances of these singular productions, have been of our sex. It is known, however, that there are races of
men

men and women affected with this disease, and that these races perpetuate themselves in Guinea, in Java, at Panama, &c.

“ Upon the whole, this degeneration does not seem to be owing to the air of the mountains ; for though I have traversed the greatest part of the Alps, and the other mountains of Europe, these are the only individuals of the kind I ever met with.”

F I N I S.

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