XXI. GAZELLA ALBIFrons.—THE BLASSECK OR WHITE FACED ANTELOPE.
PLATE XXI.

GAZELLA ALBIFRONS. THE BLESBOK, OR WHITE-FACED ANTELOPE.

Blesbok of the Cape Colonists. Nusui of the Bechuana.

**Generic Character.**—Adult male three feet eight inches high at the shoulder, and six feet three or four in extreme length. Head long and narrow, terminating in a broad and bluff muzzle. Horns from twelve to fifteen inches long, greenish white, very robust at the base; divergent, erect on the summit of the cranium, with ten or twelve knobs or semi-annuli on the anterior edge. The colours throughout are so singularly disposed and contrasted, that the animal conveys the appearance of having been artificially painted with divers hues laid on in separate masses. The sides of the head, cheeks, and whole of the neck, are of an intense purple chocolate, or venous blood-colour. The horns are divided at their base by a diamond-shaped stripe of the purest white, which, suddenly expanding between the orbits to the whole breadth of the face, passes down the nose to the muzzle, thus forming a perfect blaze. The back and shoulders hoary blueish white, thickly overlaid as if with a glazed or japanned saddle. A cast of rose colour upon the spine. A broad brown band passes from the fore-arm along the flanks; thence extending over the crupper and haunches, as well as down the whole outside of the hind, and very nearly the whole outside of the fore-legs. The inner side of all the legs snowy white, with a cross-band of brown. Belly and buttocks white. A white patch covering each elbow, and one above the tail, either surrounded by a border of bright rufous or sienna. A shade of the latter colour along the chest before each arm. Ears long, taper, and white. Tail seventeen inches in length, reaching almost to the hocks, with much posteriorly directed wavy brown and grey hair. Long linear nostrils; very indistinct muzzle. Small circular lacrimary perforations.

Female precisely similar, but slighter, less vividly coloured, and possessing more slender horns. **Maxima** two. Very gee-garious. Inhabits the elevated tracts to the eastward of the Colony known as the Boneteok flats; and is found on the great plains south of the Vaal river in astounding herds.
CHAPTER XXI.

THE BLESBOK.

"Where the wild heere, such as anywhere
We were not but to be,
Where is so great plenty.

"In his tower clear of the shore
Shall be but scarce to see,
With which right here & shall right here
Divers as ye shall see."

The Bontebok flats, which furnish the subject of this singular landscape, would appear indebted for their nomenclature to the double fact of possessing within their wide limits neither a solitary antelope of the species referred to, nor one single square rod of level land! Lying in the country of the Tambookies, immediately beyond the eastern frontier of Albany, and peopled by wild animals alone, this elevated region forms an inexhaustible hunting ground, frequented alike by parties from the colony, and by numerous of the Kafir tribes, whose assagais and throwing clubs have left within their own inhabited districts not even a sparrow alive. In place of the usual flat features of South African scenery, a boundless billowy succession of surge-like undulations are clothed throughout with a layer of bright green sward, close browsed by the wild herds that it supports. Every where is the sward illumined by a dwarf flora, endless in variety as in profusion—the daisy, the buttercup, and the dandelion, claiming, amid hundreds of strange faces, now first introduced by Dame Nature, the privilege of old acquaintance.

"Like some enchantress with her magic wand
In treasures new she decks the smiling land"—

and the whole acres positively derive their complexion from the beds of blossoming bulbs by which they are completely covered. Alternate patches of green, yellow, purple, or crimson—here bathed in bright golden sunshine, there partially shrouded by silvery mist—impair to the country the appearance of being spread with a carpet of gigantic pattern; but over the whole tract not a solitary tree, no not even a bush of so much as a foot in height, is anywhere to be seen, and owing to the total absence of fuel thus entailed, the Bontebok flats are equally without one permanent inhabitant.

On our way back to the Colony from the interior, I resolved to pay a flying visit to this boasted preserve, the inaccessible nature of which compelled us to adopt the usual plan of hiring from a farmer residing at the foot of the mountains, teams better inured than our own to so difficult an ascent. Both wagons having been freighted with fire-wood, we commenced the arduous undertaking early one Saturday morning, but the united strength of fifteen pairs of oxen to each vehicle, failing to carry them more than midway to the summit, we passed the first night on the slope, lying over like ships under a gale of wind. Renewing the attempt with the return of dawn, the omnibus was overthrown through the clumsiness of the boors, who, being pleased to attribute our disaster to the fact of its being the Seventh day, made the matter worse by superstitiously declining to assist in putting together the scattered fragments. It was then determined to advance with pack-horses, under the guidance of a friend who had joined our expedition from Fort Armstrong and was well acquainted with the flats. Four of the sorriest steeds were accordingly laden with fuel, and after we had watched the sliding descent of the tottering vehicles, which, with all four wheels locked, vibrated from side to side in the most frightful manner, our little party of four set forward, carrying each his rifle across his shoulder, and his bedding beneath his saddle. Crossing the crystal stream of the Klipplats river, brawling over its shallow and pebbly bottom, we arrived late in the evening at our wild bivouac, roasted a carbandjje, and spreading every man his sheep-skin mantle before the smouldering embers of the raggard fire—

"Our curtain—see the starry sky,
One such—the great south's dewy breast."
hurrying rack like a fruit bark on the stormy ocean—now lifted on the crest of some curling wave—now lost in the whelming hollow, at intervals peeped down upon us with a pale and ghastly light, but was a moment afterwards utterly blotted out. Most anxiously indeed did we bend our eyes to that point in the heavens where the first glimmers of dawn was to appear, and slowly enough it came, but to exhibit the whole face of nature smothered like a great wash-house under the reeking vapour.

A heavy grey canopy sailing above the ground, and fed by cloud driving along after cloud, still for some time rendered it impossible to see a yard before one’s nose; and only now and then did it favour us with even a glimpse of the wet soil on which we sat. At last, however, a broad white light expanding in the heavens, discovered the path of the glorious sun as he waded upwards, struggling with his lazy foe—when, impatient of further detention, we mounted our dripping steeds, and cantered over the summit of the nearest swell towards the centre of the flats.

In every direction was this singular prospect bounded by undulating downs and hillocks, upon whose verdant slopes, as Sol assumed greater away, and flowrets and diamond dew-drops glistened beneath the dispersing vapour, like a constellation of gems.

“'The softest grass sound carpet soft,
For the light below bowery feet.
You tilted head with chins above,
Might make proud Oberon a dream.’”

Nevertheless, of living objects such as we sought, few indeed were to be seen. The wind unfortunately setting stously from the eastward, the great body of game had deserted our neighbourhood to travel towards the Wind vogel berg, a square mountain which reared its blue crest under the expanding luninaries; and a large party of Dutchmen, whose random firing had been audible since objects became less dim and dubious, having scared the flats for several preceding days, we returned empty handed and with jaded steeds to our gipsy camp, after many an hour of fruitless toil. Here was a contingency that had never once entered into the philosophy of our programme; and, provided as we were with rations for no more than a single day, certain unpleasant apprehensions of famine began to present themselves, in addition to the coming discomforts of another distressing night. Nor were these fears a little augmented the following morning, whilst the sun beams were chasing away the misty wreaths, by the far from opportune arrival of an hungry party of insolent Amakosa. Riding familiarly up to our station, grouping in one hand a light sheet of assagis, and in the other a rude sheep-skin bridle, eleven elastic savages frang themselves curiously upon the ground; and having cast off their ample togas, and hobbleted their bare backed gurrous, proceeded straightforward to make themselves at home, assisting unwieldy in the discussion of the scanty residue of our edibles, and ungratefully expressing no very great good fortune shifted during the night, every height in succession was at peep of day crowned with gnus and blesboks.

No pause, no rest, wherever they sweep the ground;
Now mount in air and seem to touch the sky,
Now wade upwards, clasping all seaward;
Great wash-house under the reeking vapour.

Now how they vanish from the winking eye,
Now sound to air and seem to vanish by day;
No pause, no rest, wherever they sweep the ground
Dust in thin whirlwinds dance all seaward.”

My first introduction to this splendid Antelope took place on the great plains of the Vaal river, where the pursuit of thronging legions led to a solitary pilgrimage, which was conjectured both by my comrade and by our followers, to have terminated in my arrival at “that bourne whence no traveller returns.” Christmas-eve, and the greater portion of the day that preceded it, had been passed in a vain search for water, during which we had chanced upon the first faint traces of a waggon road that had been seen for many months. Having resolved to follow this guide, as leading, in all probability to the element of which we were in quest, we arrived as the next morning dawned, upon the summit of a gentle ascendency that had for some miles disturbed the monotony of the previously level landscape. Boundless was the prospect that then presented

* A tribe of glistening Kafirs, at perpetual combat with the Colonists.
when, crying grievously requiring to be recruited, I mounted to and fro between the string of frosted salt-pans, and the little hill, which, floating in the sea of mirage that environed it, great herds of blesboks were busily licking the crystalized efflorescence. Alarmed at the approach of our cavalcade, vast troops of them were continually sweeping past against the wind, carrying their broad white noses close to the ground like a parched tongue rattling like a hoard against the palate of my mouth, I wandered on over flowery wastes still lengthening in all directions, and at last became totally bewildered.

The absence of fuel shortly obliged us to continue our march over a succession of salt-pans, upon which numerous great herds of blesboks were busily licking the crystalized efflorescence. Alarmed at the approach of our cavalcade, vast troops of them were continually sweeping past against the wind, carrying their broad white noses close to the ground like a parched tongue rattling like a hoard against the palate of my mouth, I wandered on over flowery wastes still lengthening in all directions, and at last became totally bewildered.

Mockery, a solitary quagga, magnified ten thousand times, was seen, and again and again I strained my eyes for the road. The monotony of the landscape, the bearing of the table mountains considerably to the westward of it, crossed the road, and the river bank as fast as possible, but night closing in, I was fain to prepare for a bivouac among its bushes. The stars were completely concealed behind a clouded sky, and repeated flashes of lightning were accompanied by the rumbling of distant thunder. All my preparations completed, I was listening with breathless attention for the cracking of a whip, or the signal-guns which I knew would be fired from the waggon.

Having traversed some of the prairies of their brilliant party-coloured robes, I packed the apaches on my horse, and, well satisfied with my performance, set out to rejoin the waggon. But ah! vainly was it that I sought for them. Cantering all attempts at recognition, and my search proved utterly fruitless. Every feature of the cone was precisely the same—their whirring flight in gyration through the quivering atmosphere—but neither fount, nor pool, nor running stream, greeted my straining gaze. At length, the refraction dissipating with the declining day, the three table-topped mountains became visible as though poised in the sky, again and again I strained my eyes for the road. The monotony of the landscape, the bearing of the table mountains considerably to the westward of it, crossed the road, and the river bank as fast as possible, but night closing in, I was fain to prepare for a bivouac among its bushes. The stars were completely concealed behind a clouded sky, and repeated flashes of lightning were accompanied by the rumbling of distant thunder. All my preparations completed, I was listening with breathless attention for the cracking of a whip, or the signal-guns which I knew would be fired from the waggon, when to my inexpressible delight a joyous beacon fire shone suddenly forth near the river. Upon consideration I felt somewhat puzzled to account for its appearance in a spot which I had so recently passed, but concluding that the waggon must subsequently have arrived there, I "laid the fluttering motion to my soul," and groped my way towards the light. My disappointment and disgust may better be imagined than described, when, flitting like troubled spirits around the unfriendly blaze, I discovered a gang of Lilliputian Bushmen, with their imp-like squaws, carousing over a carcass!
Whilst slipping silently back to my sylvan den, fully impressed with the necessity of remaining perfectly quiet, I courageously ventured to indulge hope, that the good waggon upon whom my sole dependence now rested, would be so fortunate as to escape the prying observation of these lynx-eyed vagabonds. His uneasy motorists, accompanied by constant efforts to get loose, soon apprized me of the presence likewise of lions at no great distance to windward; but the fear of attracting my two-legged enemies to the spot, whilst it prevented my kindling a fire for his protection, denied me also the means of dressing a kouskous wherewith I had taken care to provide myself. Dying with hunger, and having my "girdle of famine" tightened to the last hole, I felt strongly tempted to follow the example of the savages, and devour my Christmas roast uncooked. About midnight, however, having prepared a deep oven in the ground, I ventured to light a small fire, and the fowl being duly baked and disposed of, I presently betook myself to sleep.

The following morning set in with tremendous rain. Cold, drenched, and cramped, I rose from my aquatic bed, and at once perceived that all hope of regaining the trail of the waggon was at an end. The soil consisting chiefly of a red loamy earth, from which the faintly marked tracks were easily obliterated, I resolved to follow the course of the river several miles further to the westward, and should I there unfortunately fail in discovering the camp, to cross the country in a direct line to the conical hill, still a conspicuous landmark—thus certainly intersecting the road, if indeed any vestige of it remained, of which I began to be doubtful. To this programme I rigorously adhered, walking the greater part of the day to save my harassed steed, upon whose back I contemplated the probability of having to seek my way alone to the Colony—a probability which might easily increase about sunset, when I found myself preparing to perfect my acquaintance with the pine-apple, by roasting on its summit.

"In a deep sea, dog by no mortal hand."

During this second day's weary pilgrimage, scorched by the ardent and reflected rays of a summer sun, I arrived at an extensive plain covered with water lilies, and bordered by a broad belt of flags and rushes. Haste in approaching the margin, I became suddenly engulfed in a pitfall, six feet in depth, filled with mire and water, from which I extricated myself with inconceivable difficulty. On recovering my lost shoes out of the stiff blue clay at the bottom, I perceived that the whole tank was closely invested by a chain of these traps, which had been carefully covered over by my pigmy foes, the Bushmen. Having shot a springbok, I here roasted enough of the flesh to satisfy the cravings of hunger, and slinging a fine fat leg on either side of the saddle, took up my night's lodging in the manner already described, without having been able to discover the smallest traces of the road.

The night was serene and starlit. From the apex of my strong hold did I look forth upon the tranquil expansive breadth, and listen for hours to catch some friendly melody that might direct my bewildered footsteps. Where, alas! was the "busy hum of men?" The shrill neighing of the wild ass, the bleat of the timid springbok, or the hoarse bellow of the gnu, with the deep-drawn distant sighing of some prowling lion, occasionally borne along upon the breeze, alone disturbed the grave-like stillness of the wilderness! Most seriously did I now debate with myself upon the propriety of making for either side of the saddle, took up my night's lodging in the manner already described, without having been able to discover the smallest traces of the road.

The next day dawned, and once again having saddled my trusty beast, I struck into the pathless waste, intending to make a wide sweep to the northward and westward, where it was possible that rain might not have fallen. Far and wide, however, the cannelled carpet glistened beneath the reviving effects of the recent showers; the sun as he rose imparting to the face of nature a more than magic beauty, which seemed but to laugh at my wretched and forlorn condition. Well do I recall to memory that resplendent sunrise—that canopy of purple clouds retiring before the splendour of the golden orb, and resolving itself into ten million fantastic figures; whilst by the roseate and crimson ground disclosed beyond it, the surrounding heavens were tinted with every variety and depth of shade. About noon, lifting up my eyes from the ground, on which they had long and despondingly sought for some indication of the party having passed, what was my joy and delight to recognize the identical "fountain" at which we had broken our fast on Christmas morning! Vaulting with aves new bresed into the saddle, I eagerly dashed towards the spot, unable almost to convince myself of the reality of the discovery; but having instantly hit upon the trail of our caravan, the fancied dream was dispelled; and following up the traces steadily, I shortly fell in with a party of Lihoya who were busily feasting upon a blesbok that had been taken in a pit-fall. The potent agency of a broken cigar enabling me to negotiate with these terrified savages, female as well as male, a treaty of perpetual alliance, I pointed to the wheel-ruts, and giving by signs to understand what I required, struck merrily across the broad plain under their willing guidance, and in less than another hour was within sight of the white tilt of our waggon! Jaded and way-worn, it was with the most profound gratitude to an all protecting Providence that I thus found myself restored to the cañon, after three days of anxious and weary wandering over an unexplored and inhospitable wilderness.
Great was the anxiety, and many were the dismal forebodings to which my mysterious absence had given birth. A general gloom had pervaded the camp. There being no fuel, with which to kindle a beacon-fire, whips had been cracked, and muskets discharged at intervals, both during the day and night; and my horse's spoor having been completely effaced by the rain, three separate parties had gone out in search of me, in different directions, but in vain. Those only who have experienced the warm cordiality which grows up between partners in so wild and adventurous an expedition as that in which my companion and myself had embarked, are capable of fully understanding the nature of the welcome I received—the sensations created by my safe and unhoped-for return, even extending themselves to the disaffected of our followers. On comparing notes with my fellow-traveller, I was concerned to find that in many respects he had scarcely fared better than myself; the knuckle-bone of a tainted ham having supplied the place of a smoking sirloin and richly-dotted plum-pudding,—and, with a cupful of dirty water, constituted, alas! his Christmas dinner.