



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

PLATE XXI.

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

Blesbok of the Cape Colonists. *Nunni* 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 lachrymary perforations.

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

CHAPTER XXI.

THE BLESBOK.

"Among the wild deer, such an archer
As men say that ye be,
We may not fail of good bitail
Where is so great plentie.

"And water cleve of the ribere
Shall be full sweete to me,
With which right hele I shall right welc
Endure 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 rood 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—impart 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 waggons 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 six set forward, carrying each his rifle across his shoulder, and his bedding beneath his saddle. Crossing the crystal stream of the Klipplaats river, brawling over its shallow and pebbly bottom, we arrived late in the evening at our wild bivouac, roasted a *carbonáadtje*, and spreading every man his sheep-skin mantle before the smouldering embers of the niggard fire—

"Our curtain see—the starry sky,
Our couch—the green earth's dewy breast."

Wreaths of white mist ascending from the vale, had for some time been twirling and flickering over the mountain side; and not long after we had laid us down, a heavy dew began to fall, which rapidly increased to sleet, and assumed at last the consistency of positive rain. My companion's ample tarpauline, serving to cover us both, was presently steeped in standing pools; and so bleak and unsheltered was our position, that but for a certain pocket ally, which was snugly stowed away beneath his head, and referred to every tenth minute at least, I believe we might actually have perished. My own bones ached again with the cramp, nor do I ever recollect to have passed a more comfortless night. The moon, that rode on the

hurrying rack like a frail 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 glimmering 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 sway, and flowrets and diamond dew-drops glistened beneath the dispersing vapour, like a constellation of gems.

"The velvet grass seemed carpet meet,
For the light fairies' lively feet.
Yon tufted knoll with daisies strown,
Might make proud Oberon a throne."

Nevertheless, of living objects such as we sought, few indeed were to be seen. The wind unfortunately setting stoutly 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 luminary; and a large party of Dutchmen, whose random firing had been audible since objects became less dim and dubious, having scoured 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 programma; 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 foggy 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, grasping in one hand a light sheaf of assagais, and in the other a rude sheep-skin bridle, eleven elastic savages flung themselves carelessly upon the ground; and having cast off their ample togas, and hobbled their bare backed garrons, proceeded straightway to make themselves at home, assisting uninvited in the discussion of the scanty residue of our edibles, and ungratefully expressing no very qualified discontent at our improvident commissariat. Leaving with our Hottentot attendants a sufficient supply of the munitions of war, to deter these free and easy visitors from any attempt upon the baggage, we again took the field, and being most fortunately rewarded with a brace of bouncing blesboks, were conveying their comely carcasses to the spit, when we had the gratification of perceiving the group of equestrian blackguards in the act of prosecuting their marauding journey over the flats, little less empty bellied than they came.

The third night proved far more clement than its predecessors, but the reduced stock of fuel not affording the luxury of a fire, our dreams were repeatedly disturbed by the prowling visits of a "laughing hyena," one of the showman's "real indomitable" fellows, whose keen olfactory organs had naturally enough been tickled by the savour of our venison. A prolonged whoop, which sounded close to my ear, causing me for the fourth time to start from my slumbers, and the miscreant's apparition being presented in strong nocturnal relief upon the brow of the nearest rise, I took advantage of the moon's light, to indulge myself with a quiet *pot shot* from under the blanket. A dismal howl replied to the report of my rifle, and the limping gait of the obtruder, as he fled wailing over the hill-top, with the whole Hottentot hue-and-cry at his heels, afforded the most gratifying evidence that my spherical messenger had so cleverly performed its errand, that we need entertain little apprehension of any further disturbance from that quarter. The next day was to be our last upon the flats, and the wind having by great good fortune shifted during the night, every height in succession was at peep of day crowned with gnoos and blesboks. Numbers of the latter were now slaughtered, and as one troop after the other was set in motion by our equestrian pursuit, each individual arrayed in his coat of many colours—the scene, although falling very short indeed of what I had previously witnessed in regions more remote, might not inaptly be compared to the rout of a goodly army—its retreating masses, lost at one moment in the hollow, at the next re-appearing on the opposite brow, again to sink from the sight—whilst at certain intervals the tips only of the bayonets were perceptible, as scores upon scores scoured in extended file along the opposite side of some intervening ridge.

"Now low they vanish from the aching eye,
Now mount in air and seem to touch the sky;
No pause, no rest, where'er they sweep the ground
Dust in thick whirlwinds darkens all around."

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 acclivity that had for some miles disturbed the monotony of the previously level landscape. Boundless was the prospect that then presented

* A tribe of pilfering Kafirs, at perpetual enmity with the Colonists.

itself to the gaze, and deeply are its lines engraven upon the tablet of my recollection! Like a huge pine apple in the centre of a flower-decked prairie which spread away to the far horizon, stood one isolated tumulus of conical figure, whilst in the distance, three rectangular table-topped mountains of singularly uniform appearance, reminded the spectator of terraced barrack-rooms—shooting boxes, perhaps, erected by the giants of olden time. A shower of land tortoises excepted, not a living animal had been seen during the whole of the preceding day; now the welcome appearance of grazing troops of quaggas, ostriches, and springboks, with squads of hair-brained gnoos careering madly over the plain amid vast herds of blesboks,

"On whose empurpled breast
Glowed the deep hue by blood-stained hand impressed,"

proved the welcome harbingers of water; and to our delight a sedge-grown fountain was presently descried, at which, after twenty-eight hours of total abstinence, the dying teams were enabled to slake their terrible thirst.

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 pack of harriers in full cry. Having never obtained any specimens of this species, and our stock of provisions moreover grievously requiring to be recruited, I mounted *Breslar*, my favourite Rosinante, and little heeding whither I sped, dashed into the very thick of them. The pine-apple hill bearing east about five miles, must, I concluded, prove a never failing landmark to direct my return to the road, which, however faint it had become, could still readily be distinguished by a practised eye. Dealing death around, I thus continued to scour the ensanguined plain, and to use my pleasure with the herd before me, which had in the meantime increased from hundreds to thousands—reinforcements still pouring in from all directions, when, crying "hold, enough," I stayed my hand from slaughter—

"Be that it drew to the aware of none
One hundredth fat bucks did ther lay,"—

of which having divested some of the *primest* of their brilliant party-coloured robes, I packed the *spolia* on my horse, and well satisfied with my performance, set out to rejoin the waggons. But ah! vainly was it that I sought for them. Cantering to and fro between the string of frosted salt-pans, and the little hill, which, floating in the sea of mirage that environed it, seemed as though poised in the sky, again and again I strained my eyes for the road. The monotony of the landscape baffled all attempts at recognition, and my search proved utterly fruitless. Every feature of the cone was precisely the same—the table mountains were completely obscured by the mid-day haze—and in the constant recurrence of similar forms, I lost the points of the compass, and at last became totally bewildered.

To retrace my steps over plains so trampled by innumerable herds, was clearly impossible. At one moment, as if in mockery, a solitary quagga, magnified ten thousand times by the treacherous mirage, loomed like the white tilt of a waggon; but my joy at the supposed discovery was followed by the bitterest disappointment. Again a group of pigmy Bushwomen walking unnoticed among a herd of blesboks, and seen through the same deceptive medium, personated our followers with the cattle. Alas! these, too, fled at my approach, and jabbered like baboons when I had overtaken them. Several hours had thus passed in idle search, and hour after hour the prospect was still the same. Spent by fatigue and anxiety, my parched tongue rattling like a board against the palate of my mouth, I wandered on over flowery wastes still lengthening as I advanced. Dry tanks surrounded by a garden of pinks and marigolds, but yielding forth the croaking of no friendly frog, served only to increase my sufferings. Flights of pin-tailed grouse, rising noiselessly from each sun-cracked hollow, winged their whirring flight in gyrations 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 once more visible in the hitherto blank horizon. With the consoling reflection that I was now, at all events, advancing in the same direction as the caravan, I hastened forward, with renewed hope, and before dusk found myself not a little revived by a deep draught of the clearest water, from a serpentine river flowing to the westward, of which the banks were trimmed with reeds and dwarf willows, whilst portions of the sandy bed were imprinted with the heavy foot-steps of a troop of lions.

The mind ever becomes more readily reconciled to hardship and suffering than the body. Everything around me was now vague and conjectural, and wore an aspect calculated to inspire deep despondency; yet my heart was light and my spirits buoyant, and no sooner had I become convinced that I was actually astray in the midst of a howling wilderness, inhabited, if at all, by barbarous and hostile tribes, than I felt fully prepared to meet the emergency. The setting sun having given me the bearing of the table mountains considerably to the westward of south, it was evident that I had, without being aware of it, crossed the road, and ridden too far to the eastward. In the hope of yet retrieving my error, therefore, I hurried down 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 waggons, 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 waggons must subsequently have arrived there, I "laid the flattering unction to my soul," and groped my way towards the light. My disappointment and disgust may better be imagined than described, when, fitting like troubled spirits around the unfriendly blaze, I discovered a gang of Lilliputian Bushmen, with their imp-like squaws, carousing over a carcase!

Whilst slinking silently back to my sylvan den, fully impressed with the necessity of remaining perfectly quiet, I scarcely ventured to indulge hope, that the good nag upon whom my sole dependence now rested, would be so fortunate as to escape the prying observation of these lynx-eyed vagabonds. His uneasy snorting, 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 *korhaan* 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 repast 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 recovering the trail of the waggons 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 was mightily increased about sunset, when I found myself preparing to perfect my acquaintance with the pineapple, by roosting on its summit

"In a deep cave, dug 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 pond covered with water lilies, and bordered by a broad belt of flags and rushes. Hastily 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 expanse beneath, 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 gnou, 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 the colony, instead of prolonging my fruitless search. It is true that every thing betwixt me and it was wrapped in the deepest uncertainty, and that to arrive there I should have to pass over a great extent of unknown and inhospitable soil; but on the other hand, I seemed to have already done all that human ingenuity could devise, and without the smallest success. I estimated my distance from New Hantam to be little more than two hundred miles; and having fortunately a good supply of ammunition, there existed a fair prospect of my being able to reach that district in six or seven days, unless driven by scarcity of game to sacrifice my steed. Taking into consideration, however, the long and dismal state of uncertainty that the measure must entail upon my companion, I finally resolved to make one more huntsman-like cast before giving up the search in despair.

Another 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 enamelled 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 recal 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 "reed encircled fountain" at which we had broken our fast on Christmas morning! Vaulting with nerves new braced 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 waggons! Jaded and way-worn, it was with the most profound gratitude to an all protecting Providence that I thus found myself restored to the cafila, 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.



Head of the Blesbok as preserved by Capt. Harns.