

## HIGHLAND SHEEP.



### CHAPTER XXXV.

Introduction of Sheep into the Highlands—Aversion of Highlanders to Sheep; disliked by Deer also—Prophecy—Activity of black-faced Sheep; instincts of—Mountain Sheep in enclosures—The Plaid; uses of; various ways of wearing; manufactures of; invisible colours—Shepherds—Burning of Heather—Natural enemies of Sheep—Shepherds' Dogs—Origin of Dogs.

UNTIL within the last few years the Highlanders had a strong prejudice against the introduction of sheep on their mountains. Their dislike to this useful animal was founded on several causes. In the first place the Celt dislikes *any* innovation or change in his old customs; in the next he had a dread of clearances, *i.e.*, of small holdings being done away with, and merged in large farms; and he feared also that the black cattle, the former staple produce of the Scotch mountains, would be again forced to give way before these intruders; and I firmly believe that one of his greatest objections to the sheep was that the red-deer have a strong

dislike to the company and smell of the woolly strangers. I do not, however, conceive that this antipathy on the part of the deer arises from any aversion to the sheep themselves, but from a dread of their accompaniments—the shepherds, shepherds' dogs, and the tar, the odour of which appears to be most distasteful to all wild animals.

I remember, too, being gravely told by an ancient white-headed Celt, that there was an old and undoubted prophecy, to the purport that the Highlands would be overrun and ruined by a race of "white dwarfs," and that this had now been fulfilled by the introduction of sheep.

When the Cheviot sheep first came into the North, the sheep-farmers brought with them for the most part their own shepherds from the lowlands, or rather from the borders; a fine stalwart race of men, Armstrongs, Elliots, Scotts, and others, whose names have long been famous among the wild and dreary hills which rise between Scotland and England: formerly reeves and harriers of other men's cattle and chattels, they now follow the more peaceful occupation of shepherds and drovers; and only occasionally show the fiery spirit of their hardy ancestors by breaking each other's heads at some border fair or market. But the genuine Highlander has not, I think, yet sobered

down into a good shepherd; and the border men still form the most persevering and careful guardians of the large flocks which now fill all the northern mountains.

In most parts the border sheep, the Cheviot at least, have taken the place of the old black-faced breed, being more profitable in wool, and growing more quickly to a profitable size for the butcher. I must own to having a strong prejudice in favour of the picturesque little black-faced sheep, with their long wool and horns. Nothing, too, can be more adapted to our scenery than these animals; wild and active as goats, they scramble with the sure foot of a chamois over the most impracticable-looking rocks in search of some sheltered nook or shelf where the grass is early and green, or for refuge from any fancied danger. On the most impassable-looking and perpendicular face of a corrie, where there does not appear to be standing room for a raven, the black-faced little fellows wind their way in single file in search of favourite spots of pasture.

A sheep, though correctly enough designated an animal "*patiens injuriæ*," is by no means without abundance of instinct and sense. Watchful to a degree, they are a constant annoyance to the deer-stalker, who loses many a shot by the object of his

long and weary crawl and scramble being suddenly warned of its danger by the cry of the sheep, a loud sound between a hiss and a whistle. No sooner does the red-deer hear a sheep utter this warning cry than he starts to his feet as if he had heard a rifle-shot, and is off in an instant. Nor does the red-deer ever mistake the direction from which the danger is to be feared. Guided by the appearance of the sheep, he sees at once which way to go in order to avoid his unseen enemy.

Mountain sheep have a great foreknowledge of alterations in the weather ; and I have frequently seen them changing their ground in a body before the commencement of a storm, which as yet was not foreseen by myself. Nevertheless, the sheep-farmer occasionally suffers great loss by drifting storms of snow towards the end of winter, when the sheep are weak and in poor condition. The length of time that sheep will exist under snow is astonishing, particularly when a number are buried together, the warmth of their breath and bodies keeping an open space round them sufficient for breathing room. Floods occasionally carry them off from the low lands near the mountain streams ; and yet they are by no means bad swimmers. I have seen black-faced sheep actually swim into a creek of the sea to escape the pursuit of a dog ;

but in rapid currents they soon get subdued and drowned.

Amongst other instances of sagacity in sheep, I have often been amused by the perfect knowledge which they have of the boundaries of the farm to which they belong. From being frequently driven back when found wandering, they soon learn the exact boundary lines within which they are left in peace both by the shepherd and his dog.

It is a mistake to suppose that the black-faced sheep taken from the mountains are so very difficult to keep in enclosed fields. In the case of my own small flock, which I keep for the use of my family, I find that if brought from the open mountain the sheep never attempt to get over the fences, and content with their improved keep, and unused to walls or palings, they do not seem to think it possible to get out of the field. If, however, they come from an *enclosed* farm, they generally have already found out that fences *can* be surmounted: and then nothing will keep them in; once out, they go straight off, wandering to considerable distances, sometimes, indeed, making direct for their former home. Broken walls and ill-kept palings have taught them the use of their legs, and, this once learned, they are active enough to get over anything.

However wild the black-faced sheep may be when first brought down from the mountains, those which I have had very soon become quite tame, and not only crowd round their daily barrows of turnips in the winter, snatching them out of the hand of the old man who feeds them, but soon, after a little shy coquetry, will eat biscuits and apples from the hands of the children, will follow them into the house, and sometimes become such pets, that their destined fate at the hands of the butcher is often deferred *sine die*.

Though Highlanders are scarcely yet reconciled to sheep as inhabitants of their mountains, they know full well how to benefit by that most useful product of their fleece—the plaid. Summer or winter, the Highlander will scarcely ever stir out without his plaid, and numberless are the different modes in which he folds and wears it, so as best to suit all changes of temperature and weather. I have seen in a London paper an advertisement offering to teach young ladies the use of the “fan” in six lessons, for the moderate consideration of five guineas. Although it seems incredible that the fair advertiser can meet with pupils, yet it is clear she does, or she would never incur the expense of long and repeated advertisements. Now if some well-skilled wearer of the plaid were to commence busi-

ness as teacher of the various ways and shapes in which its folds may be arranged both for picturesque effect and for utility, he would be far more deserving of encouragement than the five guinea teacher of the "use of the fan." The great advantage of a plaid over every other garment for the pedestrian, traveller, or sportsman, on the mountain side, is, that in sunshine and dry weather, folded in a rope-like twist round the body, it is no encumbrance, and can be so disposed as to be entirely out of the wearer's way, however much he may have occasion to use his arms. Should, however, a cutting blast or a cold rain come on, the plaid can be made to perform well all the offices of a cloak, either short or long, and one that will completely keep out a shower of any moderate duration. Very little rain is absorbed by a plaid if of good materials, tolerably new, and well put on. The drops run off the long wool; it takes a long time before it begins to soak through, and an hour's breeze dries it again.

I have shot through many a long day with a plaid round me, without feeling in the slightest degree encumbered by it, and knowing at the same time that it was always at hand, like a friend in need, to shelter myself and gun from the sudden squalls of wind or rain which are so frequent on

the mountains during the autumn. When you are seated in a pass, waiting for roe, the trusty plaid is a most valuable friend ; or when waiting for wild duck or swan, it covers you and your dog from the shower of sleet or snow which would otherwise frequently oblige you to wend your way homewards, perhaps at the very moment when your chance for shots was the best.

The shepherd makes use of his plaid not only as a protection against cold and wet, but also as a pocket or bag in which to carry anything or everything he may wish to take with him: one end being sewed up, although it does not take away from the general utility of the garment, forms a pocket of wondrous capacity, in which, without inconvenience to the wearer, no small amount of weight and bulk may be carried. The weakly lamb often is taken home in this warm receptacle, while the anxious ewe follows, bleating incessantly, but apparently with perfect confidence in the good intentions of her master. In fact its uses are endless ; and those, and those only, know its real value who have thoroughly learnt how to put it on, so as to suit all weathers, all states of the atmosphere, and, above all, the direction and the power of the wind.

A good plaid is not, however, always to be bought at a shop ; and unless the wool be new and



well spun, and the fabric tight and regular, it will disappoint the wearer. When I speak of *new* wool, I mean that the wool of which the plaid is made should be new. But in these days, when all manufacturing processes are cheap, and the demand for woollen goods enormous, great quantities of old and worn-out clothes are ground, or rather *teased* up again, with machinery invented for the purpose, and are reweave into *new* cloth and plaiding. The worthlessness of all goods in which this renovated trash forms a considerable portion may easily be imagined.

I am inclined to think that in the smaller woollen manufactories such tricks are less easily and less frequently played. At the bonny and pleasant little town of Forres I have for many years had most excellent and trustworthy pieces of plaiding made for me, of all degrees of fineness and coarseness; not only rough coarse fabrics, made of black-faced wool, for a winter dreadnought shooting-coat, impervious to cold or wet, but also the finest and softest plaiding for ladies' dresses. Nor did I ever put any of my Forres-made stuff into the hands of a tailor, Scotch or English, without its being pronounced superlative of its kind.

Nothing is so invisible on the hillside as the common shepherd's check, of a small pattern. It

forms a *tout ensemble* of an indistinct gray colour, which is most difficult to distinguish from a gray stone or rock ; indeed, at a certain distance this kind of gray becomes almost invisible. I have tried many shades of colour, but never found anything so suited to purposes of concealment as the common small-sized black and white check.

Dressed in this kind of stuff, and sitting motionless against a rock, I have seen a roebuck, or even a red-deer, approach within a few yards of me without the least suspicion, although I was otherwise entirely unconcealed.

I am inclined to think that wild animals and birds judge by the outline far more than by the colour of any object, and immediately detect any change in the shape of an accustomed rock or bush ; and hence it is so difficult to look over your place of ambush without being immediately discovered. Variations of colour alarm them much less, because all objects are perpetually changing their colour, according as they are wet or dry, in sunshine or in shade. In wild-fowl shooting I have often observed that when placed even in front of a bush I am not seen by the birds in the evening, but that, however dark it may be, they take alarm if I show the smallest part of my cap above the bush.

A Highland shepherd leads, or ought to lead, a

most active life. If he perform his duty zealously, he has little time for idleness, for on a mountain sheep-farm every season of the year demands constant attention and activity. Sheep have sometimes an obstinate preference for those parts of their pasturing ground which the shepherd particularly wishes to reserve for another part of the year. The fresh green grass which ought to be their food for the winter is equally attractive in the earlier part of the year; and they require to be constantly driven away from the tempting spots. Mountain sheep, when they have once found out a favourite piece of feeding ground, be it grass or even the shepherd's own bit of oats, are most determined marauders. Although they are always ready, conscious of their guilt, to fly at the first distant appearance of the shepherd or his dog, they are equally eager to return the moment that the coast is clear. A skilful shepherd will always endeavour to make such arrangements as shall secure good feeding for his flock at all seasons. On the green banks of many mountain streams these animals can find food when the higher grounds are white with snow. There are long green stretches of this kind on the upper part of the Findhorn, enlivening with their brightness the dreary brown mountains of the Monaghleahd,

through which the river flows. A certain portion of the heather should be burnt every season, so as to produce a fresh supply of young and tender shoots. On these fresh patches all animals delight to feed. The red-deer comes from the far off corries, where he has lain in quiet, rest, and solitude, to graze on the short, sweet plants of the young heather which spring up the first season after the hill has been burnt, and nothing so perfectly suits the grouse as these patches. Short as the heather is, it is a region of abundance to these birds; and in rainy weather they take to the bare spots to escape the wet dropping off the higher and older plants.

Sheep, if allowed to do so, will feed so constantly on the newly burnt heather as entirely to prevent its growing; and it is therefore necessary to keep them off for a certain time to prevent this evil. It happens frequently that by burning the heather when it is too dry, or owing to some carelessness on the part of the shepherd, the fire gets such power that it cannot be checked when required, and thus much damage is done, miles of hill are laid bare at once, and the advantage of having a constant succession of food coming on is lost. When once the fire becomes thus powerful, nothing stops it excepting heavy rain, or the accident of its burning in

the direction of some stream wide enough to form a check to the devouring element. Plantations of considerable extent are sometimes burnt. In Strathspey this year (1848) a great loss occurred from this cause. Heather for miles in extent was burnt, and nearly a hundred acres of fine plantation were destroyed before the fire could be checked—a miniature imitation, in short, of the prairie burnings of the far West. A large heather-burning on a hillside has a most picturesque appearance in a dark night, as the flames dance rapidly along the slopes, making the surrounding darkness appear still more deep. When the burnings occur too late in the season, and during the time that the grouse and black game have eggs, great destruction takes place, not of the eggs only, but of the parent birds; whereas judicious burning is advantageous equally to the sheep-farmer and the grouse-shooter, the same succession of heather of different ages being requisite for the well-being of both sheep and game.

The wild enemies of sheep in Scotland are daily and rapidly decreasing. A very few years ago the sheep-farmer sustained great loss from foxes, eagles, ravens, etc.; even the common gray crow will take to killing the new-born lambs, pecking out their eyes as soon as the little animals are dropped, and,

if not killing them on the spot, leaving them to perish miserably. The foxes on some of the more inaccessible mountains still keep their ground, and in the lambing season do an immensity of damage, for this animal has the destructive inclination to kill not only as many as she requires for the food of her young cubs, but every lamb which she can manage to get hold of, leaving the bodies on the ground, or slightly concealing them.

I imagine that all animals who, like foxes, hide a part of their prey, only return to this reserve of food in the case of their not being successful in their hunting for fresh game. All hiding birds and animals prefer feeding on a newly killed prey, the blood of which is still warm. Sometimes, if driven by hunger or unsuccessful hunting, they return immediately and dig up what they had laid by: sometimes several days elapse before they return, and often the hidden bodies are never re-visited at all.

Eagles kill a considerable number of lambs, carrying them up to their eyrie without difficulty; indeed a good shepherd, if he does his duty by his master, has constant employment in watching and guarding his charge. Without the aid of his dogs the best shepherd would be perfectly helpless on our extensive mountain ranges; in fact, without

sheep-dogs the sheep would, in spite of all the shepherd's exertions, be everywhere, anywhere, nowhere: we should have to give up eating mutton, or to stalk and shoot the sheep like red-deer. This is not a fanciful assertion, but would absolutely be the case. The very great sagacity of these dogs in their own line of business is perfectly astonishing; and I have frequently given up an hour or two of my grouse-shooting to watch the manœuvres of a shepherd and his dogs, and have thought the time well bestowed.

Some of the breeds of the Scotch sheep-dog have a very strong resemblance to the wolf, so much so as to lead one to adopt the theory that the domestic dog, notwithstanding all its varieties of size, shape, and disposition, is derived originally from this animal. The wild-dogs of Africa and India, who in packs hunt down the larger wild animals, and are said to worry to death even the lion and tiger, are adduced as disproving this supposition. But these wild-dogs do not appear to be the indigenous and native denizens of the wilderness, but to have originated from domestic dogs who, having become ownerless, had turned wild. Although we all know that the wolf can seldom be tamed, some few well-authenticated instances prove that this animal sometimes entirely throws aside its natural blood-

thirsty disposition. In the Edinburgh Zoological Gardens there is a fine large wolf who shows as unmistakable signs of gratitude and pleasure at being caressed as any spaniel could do.

The wolf and dog of the Arctic regions resemble each other so much in appearance as to induce casual observers to suppose that they are very nearly the same animal ; but, notwithstanding this likeness, there seems to be the most deadly and relentless warfare carried on between the two animals.

The fox has in my opinion far less right than the wolf to claim affinity to the dog ; at least the relationship must be much more remote.

