



MERINOS IN AMERICA.

THE writer of a recently printed book concerning Americans of royal descent, and all such Americans as come near to being so graciously favored, has neglected to mention certain Americans who are descended from the pets of the proudest kings and nobles of the Old World. For there is such a family here,—one so large that it greatly outnumbers all American descendants of European royal lines, excepting perhaps those of the green isle, almost as prolific of kings as of democrats. They carry their finely clothed blue-blooded bodies on four legs, for they are the famous American Merino sheep.

The Merino sheep originated in Spain, probably two thousand years ago, from a cross of African rams with the native ewes, and in course of time became established as a distinct breed, with such marked character-

istics as to differentiate them from all other breeds in the world.

Different provinces had their different strains of Merinos, which were like strawberries in that, though all were good, some were better than others. There were also two great divisions—the Transhumantes or traveling flocks, and the Estantes or stationary flocks. The Transhumantes were considered the best, as they had a right to be; for their owners were kings, nobles, and rich priests, and they had the pick of the fatness of the whole land, being pastured on the southern plains in winter, and in the spring and summer on the then fresher herbage of the mountains to the northward, from which they returned in the fall. For the accommodation of these four or five millions during their migrations, cultivators of the intervening land were obliged to leave a road,

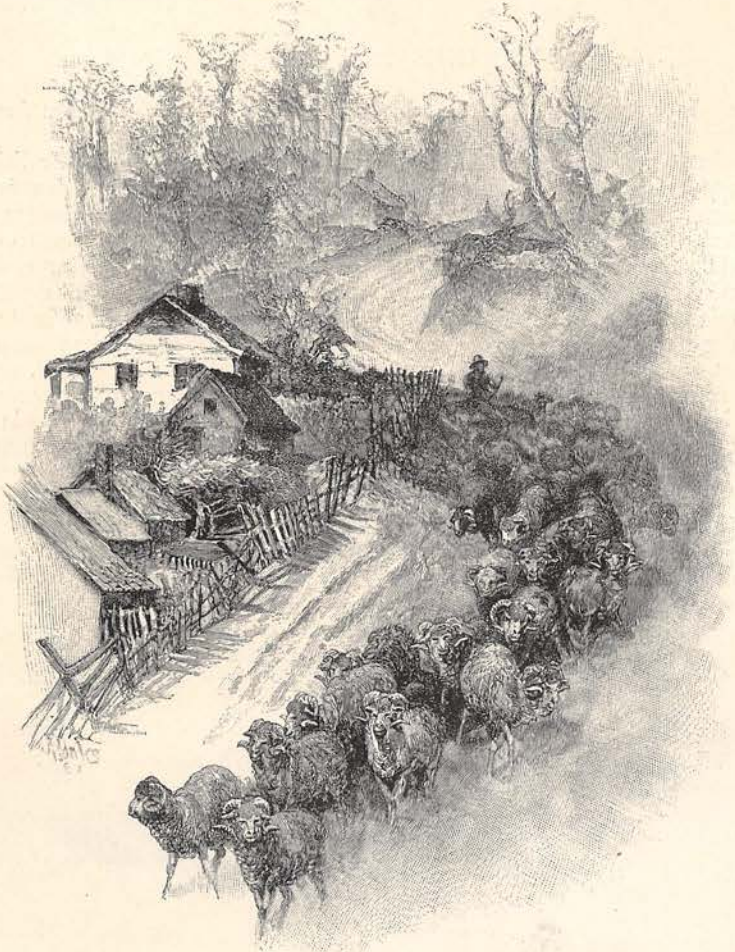


IN AN OLD PASTURE.

not less than ninety yards wide, as well as commons for the feeding of these flocks—a grievous burden to the husbandman, and for which there was little or no redress. A French writer says: “It was seldom that proprietors of land made demands when they sustained damage, thinking it better to suffer than to con-

the life of their guardians are referred to the interesting essay on Sheep, by Robert R. Livingston, printed by order of the Legislature of New York in 1810.

Of the traveling sheep were the strains known as Escurials, Guadalupe, Paulars, Infantados, Negrettis, and others, all esteemed



A DROVE OF RAMS.

test, when they were assured that the expense would greatly exceed any compensation they might recover.” A Spanish writer complains in a memoir addressed to his king, that “the corps of junadines (the proprietors of flocks) enjoy an enormous power, and have not only engrossed all the pastures of the kingdom, but have made cultivators abandon their most fertile lands; thus they have banished the estantes, ruined agriculture, and depopulated the country.” The transhumantes were in flocks of ten thousand, cared for by fifty shepherds, each with a dog, and under the direction of a chief. Those who wish to learn more of the management of these flocks and

for various qualities, and some of whose names have become familiar to American ears. The stationary flocks appear to have passed away, or at least to have gained no renown.

The Spanish sheep reached their highest excellence about the beginning of this century; but during the Peninsular war the best flocks were destroyed or neglected, and the race so deteriorated that in 1851 a Vermont breeder of Merinos, who went to Spain on purpose to see the sheep of that country, wrote that he did not see a sheep there for which he would pay freight to America, and did not believe they had any of pure blood! But Merinos of pure blood had been brought into France in



PASSING FLOCKS ON A DUSTY ROAD.

the last quarter of the eighteenth century, and there carefully and judiciously bred, and as carefully but injudiciously bred in Saxony, where everything was sacrificed to fineness of fleece.

Less than one hundred years ago the sheep of the United States were the descendants of the English breeds, mixed and intermixed till they had lost the distinctive characteristics of their long-wooled, well-fleshed ancestors, and were known as "natives" (a name they were as much entitled to as their owners), being born here of parents who had not slept or grazed under other skies. For many generations having little care, their best shelter in winter being the stacks their poor fodder was tossed from, and their fare in summer the scant grass among the stumps of the clearings and the shaded herbage of the woods, by the survival of the fittest they came to be a hardy race, almost as wild as deer, and almost as well fitted to withstand the rigors of our climate and to elude capture by wild beasts or their rightful owners. Indeed, so much had they recovered the habits of their remotest ancestors, that to get up the settler's flock for washing or shearing, or the draft of a number for slaughter or sale, was at least a half-day's task, if not one uncertain of fulfillment. All the farm hands, and often the women and children of the household, were mustered for these herdings, and likely enough

the neighbors had to be called in to help. The flocks were generally small, and the coarse, thin, short wool was mostly worked upon the now bygone hand-cards, spinning-wheels, and hand-loom for home use. As the clearings widened, the flocks of sheep grew larger, and wool-growing for market became an industry of some importance. The character of the animals and the quality of their fleeces remained almost unchanged until this century was a half score years old, when the Merinos had become established here, and the effect of their cross with the natives began to be manifest.

Perhaps mention should be made here of the Smith's Island sheep, of unknown origin, but peculiar to the island from which they took their name, which lies off the coast of Virginia, and belonged, about 1810, to Mr. Custis, Washington's stepson, who wrote a pamphlet concerning them, in which he says: "Their wool is a great deal longer than the Spanish, in quality vastly superior; the size and figure of the animal admit of no comparison, being highly in favor of the Smith's Island."

Livingston does not indorse these claims, but says of the wool: "It is soft, white, and silky, but neither so fine nor so soft as the Merino wool." If this breed is not extinct, it never gained much renown, nor noticeably spread

beyond its island borders. I think Randall does not mention it in his "Practical Shepherd." There were also the Otter sheep, said

eight and a half pounds of brook-washed wool, the heaviest fleece borne by any of the early imported Merinos of which I have seen any account."

What was then considered fine form would hardly take that place with our modern



MERINO LAMBS.

to have originated on some island on our eastern coast, and whose distinguishing peculiarity was such extreme shortness of legs that Livingston says they could not run or jump, and they even walked with some difficulty. And there

were the Arlington sheep, derived from stock imported by Washington, the male a Persian ram, the mothers Bakewell ewes. They seem to have been a valuable breed of long-wooled sheep, but are now unknown.

The first importation of Merino sheep on record is that of William Foster, of Boston, who in 1793 brought over three from Spain and gave them to a friend, who had them killed for mutton, and, if the sheep were fat, I doubt not found it good, and wished there was more of it. In 1801 four ram lambs were sent to the United States by two French gentlemen. The only one that survived the passage was owned for several years in New York, and afterward founded some excellent grade flocks in Delaware. Randall says of him: "He was of fine form, weighed one hundred and thirty-eight pounds, and yielded

breeders, and the then remarkable weight of wool was not more than a quarter that of the fleece of many of the present Americans of the race; these last, however, not brook-washed nor even rain-washed. The next year Mr. Livingston, our minister to France, sent home two pairs of Merinos from the Government flock of Châlons, and afterward a ram from the Rambouillet flocks.

A table given by Livingston in 1810 is interesting in showing the effect of the first cross on the common or native sheep. The average weight of the fleeces of a flock of these was three pounds ten ounces; that of the half-bred Merino offspring, five pounds one ounce. Similar results came of the larger importation, in the same year, by Colonel Humphreys, our minister to Spain, of twenty-one rams and seventy ewes, selected from the Infantado family. In 1809 and 1810 Mr. Jarvis, American Consul at Lisbon, bought nearly four thousand sheep of the confiscated flocks of Spanish nobles, all of which were shipped to different ports in the United States, and in those years, and the one following, from three thousand to five thousand Spanish Merinos were imported by other persons. In 1809 and 1810 half-blood merino wool was sold for seventy-five cents and full blood for two dollars a pound, and during the war of 1812 the latter sold for two dollars and fifty cents a

pound. Naturally, a Merino fever was engendered, and imported and American-born rams of the breed were sold for enormous prices, some of Livingston's ram lambs for one thousand dollars each. But such a sudden downfall followed the Peace of Ghent that, before the end of the year 1815, full-blooded sheep were sold for one dollar each.

Till 1824 the price of wool continued so low that, during the intervening years, nearly all the full-blood Merino flocks were broken up or carelessly bred. Then the enactment of

almost all owners of Spanish sheep crossed them with the Saxon, to the serious injury of their flocks. They held the foremost place in America among fine-wooled sheep for fifteen or twenty years, and then went out of favor, and have now quite disappeared, I believe.

The Spanish Merino now came to the front again, and of them the descendants of the Jarvis and Humphreys importation were most highly esteemed. As has been mentioned, the flocks of Spain had sadly deteriorated, and the American sheep derived from them



HEAD OF MERINO RAM BEFORE AND AFTER SHEARING.

a tariff favoring the production of fine wool revived the prostrate industry, and unfortunately brought about the introduction of the miserable Saxon Merinos, large numbers of which were now imported. In the breeding of these, everything having been sacrificed to fineness of wool, the result was a small, puny animal, bearing two, possibly three, pounds of very fine, short wool. Such was the craze for these unworthy favorites of the hour that

in their best days far surpassed them, if not their own progenitors.

Wool-growing became the leading industry of the Green Mountain State. Almost every Vermont farmer was a shepherd, and had his half hundred or hundreds or thousands of grade sheep or full bloods dotting the ferny pastures of the hill country or the broad levels of the Champlain valley, rank with English grasses. From old Fort Dum-

mer to the Canada line one could hardly get beyond the sound of the sheep's bleat unless he took to the great woods, and even there he was likely enough to hear the intermittent jingle of a sheep-bell chiming with the songs of the hermit and wood thrushes, or to meet

great preparation was made within house and barn. The best the farm afforded must be provided for the furnishing of the table; for the shearers were not ordinary farm laborers, but mostly farmers and farmers' sons, and as well to do as their employer,



SHEEP-SHEARING.

a flock driven clattering over the pebbles of a mountain road; for a mid-wood settler had his little herd of sheep, to which he gave in summer the freedom of the woods, and which took—alas for the owner's crops—the freedom of the meadow and grain patches, and were sheltered from the chill of winter nights in a frame barn bigger than their master's log-house.

In June, when the May-yeaned lambs were skipping in the sunshine that had warmed the pools and streams till the bullfrogs had their voices in tune, the sheep were gathered from the pastures and driven over the dusty roads to the pens beside the pools on the tapped mill-flumes and washed amid a pother of rushing waters, shouts of laughter of men and boys, and discordant, plaintive bleats of parted ewes and lambs.

A fortnight or so later came the great event of the shepherd's year, the shearing, for which

who was likely enough to shear, in his turn, for them. Whoever possessed the skill of shearing a sheep thought it not beneath him to ply his well-paid handicraft in all the country round. For these the fatted calf was killed and the green peas and strawberries were picked. The barn floor and its overhanging scaffolds were carefully swept, the stables were littered with clean straw, the wool-bench was set up, and the reel full of twine was made ready in its place. Those were merry days in the old gray barns that were not too fine to have swallows' holes in their gables, moss on their shingles, and a fringe of hemp, mayweed, and smartweed about their jagged underpinning. There was jesting and the telling of merry tales from morning till night, and bursts of laughter that scared the swallows out of the cobwebbed roof-peak and the sitting hen from her nest in the left-over hay-mow. Neighbors called to get a taste of the fun and the cider, to see how



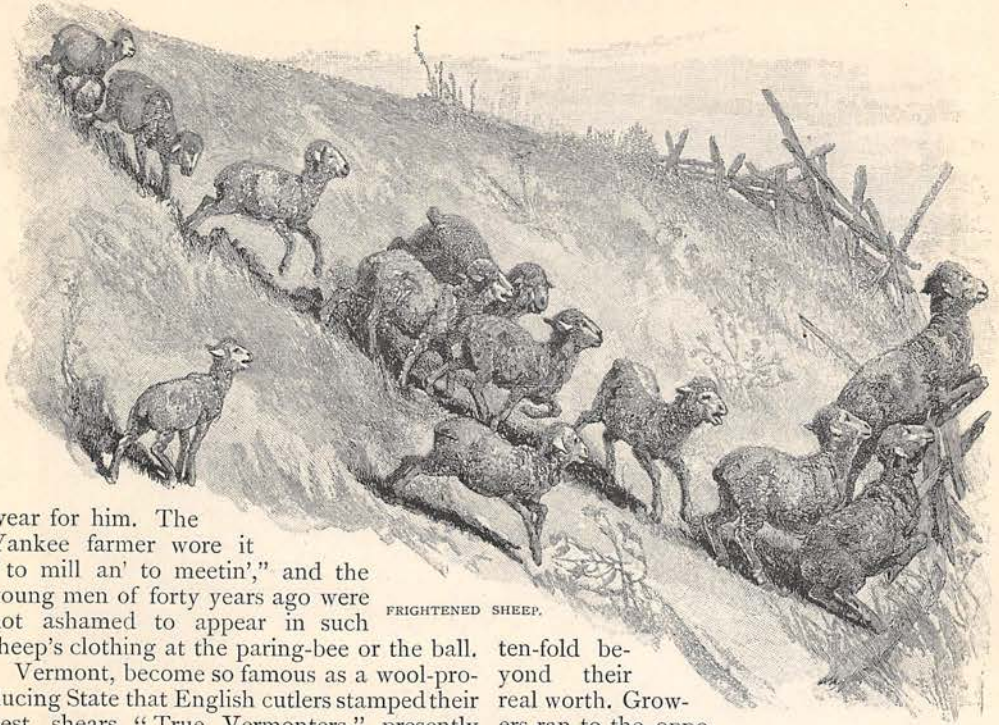
SHOWING RAMS.

the flock "evridged," and to engage hands for their own shearing. At nooning, after the grand dinner, while the older men napped on the floor, wool-bench, or scaffold, with their heads pillowed on soft places, the young fellows had trials of strength at "pulling stick" or lifting "stiff legs." The skillful wool-tyer was rarer than the skillful shearer, and in much demand in his own and neighboring townships. He tied the fleeces quickly and compactly, showing the best on the outside, but with no clod of dirty locks in the middle; for in those days wool had its place and dirt its place, but the fleece was not their common place. The catcher was a humble but not unimportant member of the force. He must be alert and with a sheep ready for each shearer as wanted, and was never to take up a sheep by the wool, but with his left arm underneath, just behind the fore legs, and his right hand grasping a hind leg. And there was the boy to pick up locks, discarding the dirty ones, which were swept outdoors. One's back aches as he remembers this unpleasant duty of his boyhood, when he was scoffed by shearers and scolded by the wool-tyer, and often had the added labor of carrying the wool to its storage. Fourteen fleeces tied up in a blanket was the load, which, if they had been of nowadays weight, would have bur-

dened a strong man; but a five-pound fleece was a heavy one then. I have never been present at one of the modern public shearings, which come before the swallows do, while winter is still skirmishing with spring, and are celebrated in the local papers; but I doubt if they are such hearty and enjoyable seasons as the old-fashioned shearings were.

The wool-buyers scoured the country at or after shearing time, and drove their bargains with the farmers. The small lots of wool were hauled in bulk to some central point of shipment, while the larger clips were sacked on the grower's premises. The sack was suspended through a hole of its own diameter in an upper floor and a few fleeces were thrown in, when the packer lowered himself into it and placed and trod the wool as it was passed to him till he had trod his way to the top. Then the sacks were lowered, sewed, weighed, marked, and went their way to market.

The "tag-locks" and pulled wool were mostly worked up in the neighboring small factories into stocking-yarn, flannel, and blankets for the farmer's use, and into the then somewhat famous "Vermont gray," which was the common cold-weather outer clothing of New England male farm folk. Readers of Thoreau will remember that he mentions it more than once, and thought it good enough



FRIGHTENED SHEEP.

wear for him. The Yankee farmer wore it "to mill an' to meetin'," and the young men of forty years ago were not ashamed to appear in such sheep's clothing at the paring-bee or the ball.

Vermont, become so famous as a wool-producing State that English cutlers stamped their best shears "True Vermonters," presently became more famous as the nursery of improvement of the Merino breed, to which object several intelligent breeders devoted their efforts. By selection of the best of the animals obtainable, the form of the sheep was made more robust, the size increased, and with it the length and thickness of all parts of the fleece, so that the wool on a sheep's belly was nearly as long as that on the sides.

French Merinos, so much changed, since the importations by Livingston, from the fashion of their Spanish ancestors that they had become a distinct family, were introduced, and had their admirers, as had the Silesian Merinos. These modern French sheep were larger and coarser than the original Spaniards; the Silesians, smaller than the French, but handsomer and hardier.

As naturally as in former times, a "Merino fever" again began to rage; fabulous prices were paid for sheep, and men mortgaged their farms to become possessors of a score of full bloods. There was no registry of flocks, and

ten-fold beyond their real worth. Growers ran to the opposite extreme from that to which they had gone during the Saxon craze, and now so sacrificed everything to weight of fleece that Vermont wool fell into the evil repute of being filthy stuff, more grease and dirt than honest fiber. The tide ebbed again to lowest water-mark; again the inheritors of the blue blood of the Paulars and Infantados went to the shambles at the prices paid for the meanest plebeian natives, and it seemed as if the sheep-farming of Vermont had got its death-blow.

Even so had the farming of sheep for wool; for in the great West a vast region had been opened wherein sheep could be kept at such a fraction of the cost entailed in winter-burdened New England that there was nothing for the Yankee wool-grower but to give up the losing fight. So most shepherds turned dairymen.

But, gifted with a wise foresight, a few owners of fine flocks kept them and bred them as carefully as ever, and in the fullness of time were richly rewarded. After awhile, it became evident that the flocks of the West could only be kept up to the desired standard by frequent infusions of the eastern blood; and so it has come about that sheep-breeding in Vermont is a greater, stronger-founded, and more prosperous industry than ever before. Each year more and more buyers come from Texas, California, Colorado, and Australia; and on many an unpretending Vermont farm, after examination of points and pedigree, often more carefully kept than their owner's, the



IMPLEMENTS.

jockeys sold grade sheep, numbered, lamp-blackened, and oiled up to the desired blackness and greasiness, for full bloods at prices

horn-crowned dons of the fold change masters at prices rivaling those of blood horses.

The care given these high-bred, fine-wooled sheep is a wonderful contrast to the little received by flocks in the times when wool-growing was the chief object of our sheep farmers; when, though sheep had good and abundant food, and fairly comfortable shelter from cold and storm, they had nothing more. The lambs were dropped in May after the ewes were turned out to grass, and

sheltered from even soft summer rains, that their raiment may suffer no loss of color. The lambs are brought forth when spring has nothing in Vermont of that season but the name, and are fed with cow's milk, or put to nurse with coarse-wooled foster-mothers, more bountiful milkers than Merinos, and have a man to care for them night and day. The old-time rams tilted it out on the field of honor, to the sore bruising of heads and battering of helmets, and sometimes loss of life.



FRIGHTENED SHEEP.

were not looked after oftener than once a day in fine weather, and got only their mother's milk, if the ewe was a good milker and was fond enough of her ungainly yearling to own it and give it such care as sheep give their young. Now the dons and doñas of blue blood have better quarters in winter than many a poor mortal, in barns so warm that water will not freeze in them, and are fed grain and roots as well as hay, and are

But now rams of a warlike turn are hooded like falcons, that they may do no harm to each other and their peaceable comrades. A blow might cost their owner a thousand dollars.

The successful sheep-breeder is up to his knees in clover, but the eastern wool-grower is on barren ground. A friend who lives in the heart of the Vermont sheep-breeding region writes me: "Ordinary rams sell for from \$10 to \$25 a head; ordinary ewes for

\$20. The highest real price any one has known a ram to sell for within two years, \$1100; the same for ewes, \$300. The wool of these sheep sells for twenty cents a pound. The wool itself does not pay for growing in the way in which these sheep are reared and cared for. The *wool* is a secondary object; the *bodies* are what they are bred for. * * * In the way sheep are kept on the large ranches south-west and west, the sheep soon deteriorate that they are obliged to have thorough-bred rams to keep up their flocks. This is particularly the case in warm climates. Nature gets rid of the superfluous clothing as soon as possible."

It is interesting to compare the portraits of the best Merinos of eighty years ago with the improved American Merinos of the present day, and see what a change has been wrought in the race without change of blood. It is not unlikely that to the uneducated eye the more natural and picturesque sheep of the old time would seem more comely than the bewrinkled, enfolded and aproned product of the many years of careful breeding. As a thing of beauty the modern Merino ram can hardly be called a success, but there are millions in this knight of the Golden Fleece.

Rowland E. Robinson.

HOW EDWIN DROOD WAS ILLUSTRATED.

CHARLES DICKENS'S first intention when he projected "Edwin Drood" was to intrust the illustrations to his son-in-law, who had worked for many years in such desultory manner as his delicate health permitted, with both pen and pencil. It was with the pen-



AN OPIUM DEN.