

JULY.—SHEEP-SHEARING FEAST.



Since finish'd our shearing, in feasting we're met,  
 And our master before us this plenty has set;  
 While gaily and glad some we holiday keep,  
 Let us give the praise due to the fleece and the sheep.—*Old Song.*

SHEEP-SHEARING Feast is one amongst the oldest of our English holidays; and appears to have ranked with the earliest celebrations of the olden times. It is frequently alluded to in the Bible, where we meet with the names of those who celebrated it; and we even find enumerated the many good things which were consumed at the feast. It is pleasant to dwell upon such ancient customs, to recal scenes which were in existence thousands of years ago, long before the shepherds assembled in the fields of Bethlehem, or the "star had arisen in the east" that illuminated a dark and benighted world. It was so natural, when mankind had gathered in the wool which was to clothe them, and the corn which was their principal food, to return thanks to the Giver of all good, and to be joyful and merry on such occasions. It is a pleasure to know, that in summer time there was the same bleating of sheep and lambs beside the brooks in the pleasant vallies of Palestine, as there is now in our own green English pastures; and that, ages ago, the shepherds washed their flocks in the hallowed waters of Jordan.

There is nothing more lively than Sheep-Shearing, where all the idlers in the village are assembled; where the crowded pens are filled with bleating sheep; while the shearers are bending as earnestly over their work as if it were a matter of life and death, though the lookers-on only consider it as a pleasant

amusement. There is, also, something pleasing in the sound, as they every now and then pause to whet or sharpen their shears—in the very attitude of the clipped sheep as they turn away, as if they scarcely knew themselves, or their companions, for they all seem lost together; so strange do they appear in their ridgy jackets; for wherever the edge of the shears has clipped there is a mark which goes round and round, as if the sheep were bandaged in fine wool. Then there is something pleasing in the scenery amid which this labour takes place, in the large old barn in the background with its opening door, or the farm-yard surrounded with stacks, sheds, and out-houses, and carts, painted blue or red, on the shafts of which the fowls are perched. But the most cheering sight of all to the "clippers," for such are the sheep-shearers called, is the preparation under the oak before the farm-horse door, or within the barn itself, for the feast; for they not only look forward to a merry time, but there is the consciousness that their labour is brought to a close; and when the last sheep is sheared, then comes the loud huzza! for no end of good things are inviting them.

The great copper is filled with firmity, made of boiled wheat, which, when cold, cuts like jelly; currants, raisins, spices of every kind; sugar shot in in pounds, which, when boiled enough, is emptied out into basins and pans, and



cooled with new milk. Round this delicious mess assemble the young—three or four, with huge wooden spoons, eating out of one pancheon, or large earthenware vessel, about two feet wide. Sometimes, they quarrel, like pigs around a trough; one has thrown a spoonful of firmity into the other's face; others have set off, and gone into the orchard to swing. The great kitchen is a very Babel of sounds.

In my "Pictures of Country Life," I have drawn the following picture of a Sheep-Shearing Feast, which is sometimes held in the barn: the immense door is turned into a table, and almost bends beneath its load of provisions. We talk of roast beef; taste what is set before them! Small of that chine: what a nosegay! It is stuffed with all kinds of savoury herbs; it tastes like duck, goose, pork, veal, &c. as if all good things were rolled into it, and made one. It would make a sick man well only to smell of it. What slices! What appetites! What horns of brown ale they empty! A waiter in a London eating-house would run away horror-stricken, and proclaim a coming famine throughout the land. They eat their peas by spoonfuls: a new potato vanishes at every mouthful; dishes are full and emptied ere you can turn your head. That was a whole ham ten minutes ago, now you behold only the bone. Who ever before saw such enormous plum-puddings? Surely they have eaten enough. Why, that broad-shouldered sun-burnt fellow has clapped a solid pound upon his plate—it is burning hot: look how he holds that large lump, and blows it between his teeth; the tears fairly start into his eyes. Where are those legs of mutton, the chines, and sirloins, and ditch-bones of beef? Gone, for ever gone! And now come the custards, and cheese-cakes, and tarts. The men will assuredly burst. See, they loosen their neckerchiefs and their waistcoats; as if they were going to begin again in downright earnest. Every man seems as if he had brought the appetite of three, as if he were resolved to do his utmost; for "eat, drink, and praise not," is the order of the day; there is no one by to begrudge them.

The following beautiful song, which we found in a collection published nearly a century and a half ago, has, no doubt, often been carolled by many a voice, long since silent, at the old English Sheep-Shearing Feasts. We regret that we are unable to discover the Author's name, for every line is stamped with the impress of true poetry:—

Tarry wool, tarry wool,  
Tarry wool is ill to spin!  
Card it well, card it well,  
Card it well ere ye begin.

When 'tis carded, rolled, and spun,  
Then the work is almost done;  
But when woven, drest, and clean,  
It may be clothing for a queen.

Sin, my bonny harmless sheep,  
That feed upon the mountain steeps,  
Bleating sweetly as ye go  
Through the winter's frost and snow.  
Hart and hind, and fallow deer,  
Are not half so useful here.  
From kites, to him the plough does pull,  
Are all obliged to tarry wool.

Up, ye shepherds! dance and skip,  
O'er the hills and vallies trip;  
O'er tarry wool sing ye the praise,  
Slag the flocks that do it raise:

"It is a poor heart that never rejoices;" and when we think of the many bleak bitter nights at the close of February and the beginning of March which the shepherds have passed in the open fields, and on the windy hills, in the "lambing season," it gives one pleasure to see them still so happy. Many a lamb would have been lost, but for the care they took of them; for there they waited night after night, amid sleet and storm, in their little temporary huts, ready to rush out in a moment, and pick up and shelter the young lambs, which would otherwise, perchance, have perished in the cold. Proud were they, when finer days came, and they looked on and saw their new-born flocks racing in the meadows.

Now let us peep into that pretty parlour. There sit the farmer's daughters at tea. What piles of cakes, honey, butter, eggs, ham, cold fowl! What smiling faces! and some of them are really beautiful pictures of rosy health. Now they are singing in the kitchen; now the fiddle is heard in the barn; there is giggling and laughter in the orchard; whisperings somewhere in the garden; children playing at hide-and-seek in the stack-yard. See where those dark-eyed seducers, the gipsies, have congregated outside the farm-yard; somehow or another they have come in for their share of the feast: by and by, they will become bolder; or, bearing a child, will venture into the barn; another will follow; and as the ale-horn circulates, it will, long before midnight, be "Hail fellow! well met!"

Then come the morris dancers, "Robin Hood," and "Maid Marian," with such poetry as is not to be found in the old ballads. Well, there is plenty for all; the ale for Sheep-Shearing Feast was brewed many a long month ago; and there are still half a dozen barrels untapped in the cellar, all of which were brewed from an extra allowance of malt, for the great occasion of "Sheep-Shearing."

But where is the old farmer? He bade his men fall to, and welcome; and we have not seen him since. No, he is in the large, old-fashioned summer-house at the bottom of his garden, with the butcher, and the miller, and the maltster, and the doctor, and the landlord from the "Black Bull;" and they have drawn the corks of a few bottles of choice port, and are enjoying themselves in their own way. The young lawyer has brought his fiddle, for he is a gentleman fiddler; and the young ladies in the parlour will come soon, and dance on the lawn, for even there the line of distinction is drawn. The wealthy farmer's daughter may condescend just to dance a turn or two in the barn; and when they have gone, the old one-eyed hired fiddler will strike up "Bob and Joan," just to show his contempt for such proud, stuck-up "thingumterrys," as he will call them; "with their waltzes, and quadrilles, and such like outlandish fal-the-rals, as their grandmothers would have been ashamed to have been seen in."

All who have wandered into the country, about the beginning of summer, must have heard the unusual bleating amongst sheep in the neighbourhood of rivers and water-courses; and if they have never beheld such a scene before, must, when they have reached the spot, have looked both with interest and pleasure at a sheep-washing. There stand three powerful sun-burnt fellows, up to the middle in water. A sheep is forced in by a man on the bank; it is seized by the first washer, who, laying fast hold of the fleece, souses the poor creature about, as if he would shake it to pieces; he then looses his hold, and the bleating animal, as he begins swimming towards the shore, is seized by the second washer in whose hands he fares no better than he did whilst an unwilling prisoner to the first. He bleats more pitifully; and just as he is within a few feet of the shore, souse he goes over and over for the third time, and then he is at liberty. He reaches the bank, and there stands bleating, while the water flows from his heavy fleece. Others who have undergone the same fate bleat in reply; while the unwashed ones are not a bit behind-hand in their complainings, for a hundred sheep "baa" like one.

Then, what a roar of laughter comes ringing upon the air, at the sturdy sheep-

herd boy, who, while thrusting and forcing along some obstinate sheep to the edge of the water, is carried in, headlong, with his woolly companion; and, by an unexpected plunge, both are sent head over ear together, and land alike with a kindred and sheepish look, for Jack is passed from hand to hand, amid loud "guffaws," which are heard half a mile off.

Sometimes the village girls will come down to the sheep-washing, and then there files round many a rough random shot of country wit: the girls trace strange likenesses amongst the sheep to some envied rival; and, in allusion to the number of lambs, "more is meant than meets the ear." The frailties of some fair Phyllis are shadowed forth; while Damon, although midway in water, burns up to his very ears. You find that Dianas are not the only nymphs who haunt the neighbourhood of these pastoral Arcadias.

We have before spoken of Sheep-Shearing as being an ancient festival, and in the Book of Samuel, we read of Nabul, a man in Ma'n, whose possessions were in Carmel, who had three thousand sheep and a thousand goats; "and he was shearing his sheep in Carmel. And David heard in the Wilderness that Nabul did shear his sheep. And when David's young men came, they said to Nabul, 'We come at a good time.'" We read again, in the same book, of Absalom having sheep-shearers, and inviting all the King's sons to the feast; and David was afraid to let all his sons go, lest they should cause Absalom too great an expense; and further on we find that they made merry with wine. For in our own English poet Herrick, we have it recorded that on such occasions there was always plenty—the table was strown with no niggard hand.

They should see first and chief  
Foundation of the feast—fat beef;  
With upper stories mutton, veal,  
And bacon, which makes full the meal;  
With several dishes standing by,  
As here a custard, there a pie,  
And here all-tempting firmity.

Summer now reigns in the full womanhood of her beauty. The roses of her lips now put in the rounded sweetness of their bloom; and the sun has stained her cheeks with the richest dyes of heaven. Her hair is wreathed with the last blossoms of her choicest flowers; and when these are faded, she will begin to look round for her place of rest, for the beautiful summer has attained her full beauty, and is already doomed to die. Slowly, slowly, you see the flowers and leaves falling, to make her death-bed; and soon the sweet songsters will take their departure, for they cannot stay to look, while one so beautiful is about to gather up her gaudy garments in "dying dignity," and stretch herself upon a grave of faded flowers, to die. And yet, once again, Time will meet Summer

At this same place,  
She'll look as lovely as of old.  
For there will spring another race  
Of flowers from out the upturn'd mould,  
That have been buried long ago.

This has ever been our favourite month for angling. Not that we ever stood high as disciples of the "gentle" craft; but rather loved to let our rods lie idly amongst the reeds and flowers; or to watch the float riding lazily upon the ripples, while we whispered to the silvery shiver which the willows were ever making; or, with half closed eyes, lay drowsed beneath the perfume that came floating from some neighbouring bean-field. What a music there was in the lapping of the little ripples, as they came, one after another, to warm themselves on the sunny shore, bowing the reeds that grew a little way out as they passed. Or to watch (as I have, in my poem entitled "Summer Morning," described a scene), when it rained,

The leaves "drop," "drop," and dot the silver stream—  
So quick each circle wore the first away.  
To see the tufted bullrush stand and dream,  
And to the ripple nod its head away;  
The water-flags with one another play.  
Bowling to every breeze that blows between,  
While purple dragon-flies their wings display;  
The restless swallow's arrowy flight is seen,  
Dimpling the sunny wave then lost amid the green.

Such sights were more pleasing to us than the capture of a thousand fish.

