

SHEEP-DOG TRIALS.

By WILLIAM T. PALMER.

Photographs by C. G. Mason, Ambleside.

WHILST watching a sheep-dog trial, I overheard a spectator describe the scene as "a marvellous exhibition of animal instinct." That is certainly

the most tractable dog so that he can manage, almost without the aid of his master, three of the wild fell sheep. These may bolt altogether and become unmanageable, or they may dash off in as many different directions, so that the perspiring dog cannot get them together by any means. One sheep may be a sluggard, and loth to pass untasted any tempting tuft of grass; another may be wild and timorous, desiring to get as far away as possible from every vestige of the dog; while the third may be a vicious animal which



WAITING FOR THE SIGNAL TO START.

correct, but many who are more closely acquainted with the sheep-dogs of Lakeland will not hesitate to add that such feats as these mark a high level of animal training. It is not difficult to persuade even the most stupid of hound puppies to follow what is to him an easily recognisable trail over pasture and fell, hill and dale; nor is it a difficult task to make him gallop his hardest all the way in this

mimic fox-hunt, by a judicious scheme of rewards and punishments; but it requires great patience and splendid skill to develop even



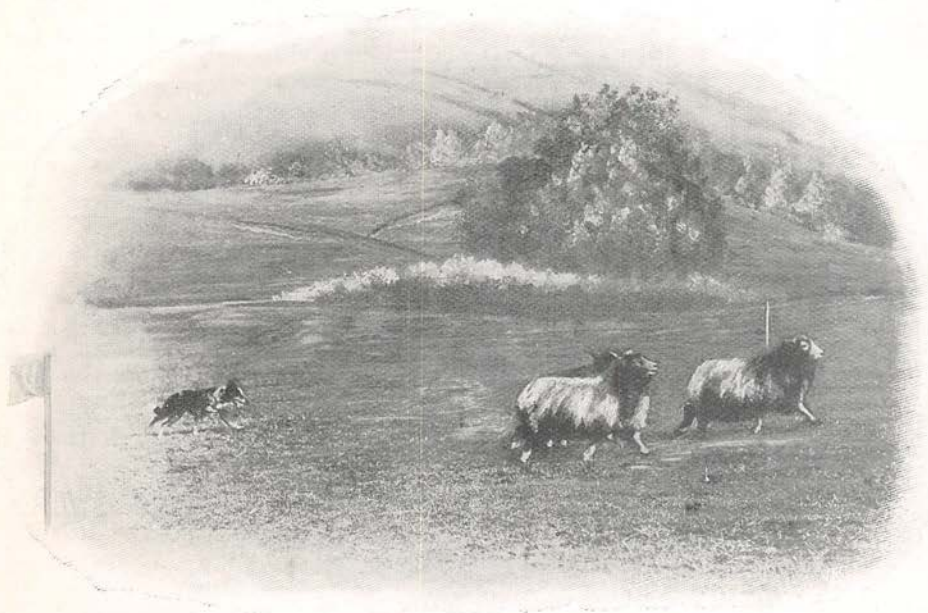
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at the least provocation will charge upon its driver. If the dog does not evade this sudden rush—and no human is sufficiently

alert to do so—the awful blow, delivered with the full weight of the sheep's body behind it, will send him rolling over and over down the hillside, probably crippling him. Added to the peculiarities of the sheep are the various characters of the dogs themselves. Some are hopeless, never attempting to remedy or retrieve the smallest error; they will drive along, perhaps, two of their triple charge, and neglect the one which has become separated. Others are inclined to push their sheep too hard and so worry them that the animals finally rush away at their utmost speed. There are dogs that are bad-tempered, and dogs that are too easy-going;

allotted excellences, and it is interesting to observe the different methods displayed on equal terms at a trial.

The test in a sheep-dog trial is to drive three sheep round a course marked with flags and hurdles, without going inside the flags or missing the opening in the hurdles. At the end of this circular course is a small fold or pen (six feet square) with a three-foot wicket, into which the sheep have to be finally driven. The owner of the dog is not allowed to give it any instructions, save by whistling or motions of stick and arm. It is almost a courtesy that he is allowed to shut the gate of the pen to secure the sheep



“HANDLING THEM WITH AS MUCH ACCURACY OF DIRECTION AS IF THEY WERE GOING ALONG A RAILED ROAD.”

there is the excited, enthusiastic puppy which wrecks his golden opportunity of success by an ill-considered yelp, and the old veteran who has learnt every foible of sheep-kind long ago, and now, grown less speedy than of yore, uses this splendid experience to carry off the victory. The shepherd, it must be assumed for the purpose of this article, is without blemish; he has trained his own dog, and its actions are an accurate reflex of his own character. It is impossible for a quiet, painstaking man to train that dog which dashes, with many a mistake, through his task, and the harrying, blustering shepherd never produces a slow-going dog. Both types, in man and animal, have their

when duly driven home; indeed, the man's part in the whole performance seems ridiculously small to all but those who understand the fine sympathy possible between man and dog during such a contest.

The greatest sheep-dog trials are held on the moor near Troutbeck every year, on the day succeeding Grasmere Sports. A good many people are present on each occasion and enjoy an excellent view of the whole course, from the loosing-pen at the commencement to the half-way hurdles high up the hillside, and down again to the finishing-pen. The best of dog talent is here, and competes under fair conditions, the spectators, though not too far away thoroughly to



"EACH FLAG PASSED CORRECTLY MEANS A POINT TO THE COMPETITOR."

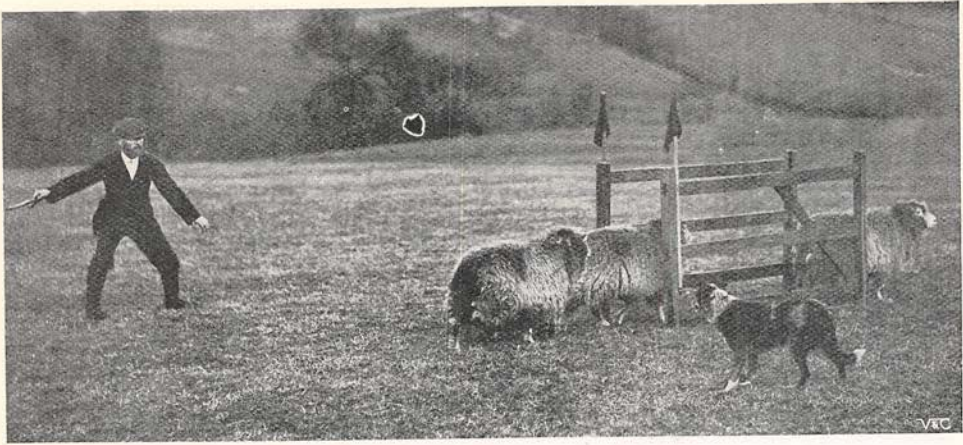
enjoy the sport, being yet sufficiently distant not to scare the sheep by their movements and conversation.

The cart has brought three sheep—two black-faced and one cross-bred shearlings (*i.e.*, last year's lambs)—and dumped them into the loosing-pen. They are small, wiry animals, without superfluous tissue and, at this time of year, not hampered by much wool. Anyone looking at their slender, muscular legs and compact bodies would accredit them with fair speed, though few could imagine the pace they can actually put on in a short burst. No dog can get

up to them by sheer racing, but sheep only gallop a short distance at a time, then stop to reconnoitre. At the judge's word the loose hurdle is allowed to fall and the sheep walk out. At the same moment the dog has been released and is now racing across the grass towards them. It may be an ugly-looking, blue-grey animal, but it soon proves that its intelligence and resource are enormous. The sheep trot briskly to the left on its approach, and have to be checked; the dog dashes in front and stops them, then gradually turns them in the direction of the flags. Each of these has to be passed on the out-



"SHEEP HAVE A GREAT OBJECTION TO PASS THROUGH A FENCE."



"THEY WILL, IF POSSIBLE, REFUSE TO MOVE FORWARD."

side. It is a splendid sight to see the dog trotting behind the sheep and handling them with as much accuracy of direction as if they were going along a railed road. Each flag passed correctly means a point to the competitor, and it is essential for the tiny flock to be guided through the hurdles half way along the course. Sheep have a great objection to pass through a fence at any time; they will, if possible, refuse to move forward, and, when forced, go through the gap at topmost speed. It is difficult under such conditions to keep the three sheep together. One or another may attempt to bolt round the obstacle, and this has to be brought back again—which takes up much time, if the sheep be at all wayward. Yet it often happens that the three are chased through separately. This passed, the sheep are driven in the direction of the folding-pen, near the judges. The working of the dog, as he approaches, can be appreciated by any attentive spectator. As the end is neared, the difficulty of the task increases; to get three lively fell sheep into an enclosure six feet square is manifestly a task requiring nicety of judgment. The sheep are dexterously manipulated now. They approach the open wicket and glance within, then

walk past. The intelligent collie dashes round and in a few seconds is lying in their path. They abruptly turn round and face the opening again; the dog jumps up in a flash as soon as the sheep cannot see him and rushes to a position behind them. They hear the rustling of the grass and turn to see where he has gone to. It is a critical moment. If he has come too near, they split off and gallop round the pen in terror; if too far away, his presence is unheeded and they again saunter past the wicket. But if he has rightly placed himself, there is a moment of indecision, of hesitation; the dog crawls a trifle nearer, the sheep draw back; they look furtively round again, and he seizes the opportunity to close in on them, the while maintaining a sleepy, disinterested look. The sheep cannot understand



"THE SHEPHERD SMARTLY CLAPS-TO THE WICKET."

why he is so somnolent; no dog in their fell philosophy has ever been anything but alert. They are now almost within the wings of the pen; the dog quietly rises to his feet, then approaches. The flock shrink away, perhaps turn to flee, but they are unable to get past the flanking hurdles, and the shepherd, who has also approached unobserved, smartly claps-to the wicket upon them.

Many a time the dog places his charge right past the pen without being able to get them to enter; frequently two are captured and the third missed; but so completely have the dogs entered into the spirit of the contest that the prizes which were once awarded

which is unfortunately almost a local sport. The sheep-dog trial is, indeed, playing at shepherding—the finesse and detail are overdone by reason of the difficulty of the task, and the straight driving of which the day's work on the moors consists is hardly represented, yet the training must be beneficial. I do not hold a brief for the sheep-dog, but would say that his intelligence in everyday life is on a par with his faultless public exhibitions.

Some may desire to know of what breeds these sheep-dogs are. Well, they are various, and oftentimes a bit curious. The breed is often collie or, since a great many specimens



SOME TYPICAL SHEEP-DOGS.

to the dog who performed the trial most correctly are now given to the one which gets round in the least time.

It may be averred that there is great risk in offering prizes for this class of feat that dogs may be trained exclusively to run round a marked course and pen three sheep, but there is no sign that this has occurred yet. A glance at the list of winners in the trials at Troutbeck, Ingleton, and Endmoor at least reveals the fact that a large proportion of the competitors are run by shepherds attached to the largest sheep-farms of the district, and that the remainder are under the control of the smaller holders of fell-land. There is, therefore, some practical purpose in the event,

of this type have been rendered almost unfit for the exposure of the fells by irresponsible exhibitors, the old English sheep-dog, that bob-tailed, blue-grey creature so long and undeservedly neglected, till its aptitude for sheep control was rediscovered. There are innumerable divisions of the mongrels which form the bulk of the dogs in use at the present day—some big, strong animals, with a strong dash of foxhound blood in them; some, wiry, little, stubborn creatures, partaking almost of the terrier kind in temperament. In many cases the leading breed in the constitution is unrecognisable—it is not extraordinary to meet a dog in which are clearly defined traits of half a dozen good

varieties. But they have in common a striking intelligence; long heads, short heads, light heads, heavy heads, but all with a good complement of brains. The sheep-dog is not a pampered animal, and therefore seems never out of form unless suffering from fatigue or accident. Space forbids the dilution on many more points of interest, but let me add that the keynote to successful shepherding in the first and more important instance, and then triumphal competition, is a patient, kind, and firm control over the pup, and in this a good shepherd is indis-

pensable. The day of the slow man seems to have passed with the enclosing of the commons; when the sheep were no longer to be slowly driven from one fold to another among the open fells to graze as they moved along, he and his dog disappeared. The dog which has been trained to collect its charge quickly from the allotment for the daily "count" holds the field at present, and will continue to do so till the day when the system of the fells flock-tenders has again to change with the march of the times.

