

THE LARRA MERINO—A NEW VARIETY.

BY BAUNI.

For many years past it has been the custom of persons engaged in the wool trade to make use of the term "the Australian merino," as if speaking of a distinct variety of this breed of sheep, whereas the only difference hitherto existing between the Australian and the European merino has been caused by food and climate. The different character of the wool grown in the Australian colonies, as compared with that from other parts of the world, is so marked as to almost justify the term used in the trade. Even in Australia there is a great diversity of character in the wool from different portions of the vast island continent. Wool from the splendid grazing districts in the western portions of Victoria, where the climate is comparatively cool, differs greatly from that grown on the sheep reared on the hot plains of Riverina, or in the almost tropical climate of the Queensland downs. In all, however, the character known as "Australian" is plainly marked. It is the beauty and softness of the Australian wool which have gained for it a world-wide fame. The breeders of stud sheep in all the colonies have spared neither their time nor money to produce an animal as near perfection as possible, and their patience, skill, and industry have been amply rewarded. The sheep produced from these stud flocks have been regarded by sheepowners, and with considerable show of reason, as having higher qualities to recommend them than sheep from any other part of the world. The result is that merino sheep are now but rarely imported, and any owner of a stud flock would be thought to run a great risk of deteriorating the character of his sheep if he were to use imported rams, no matter whence they came.

Among coarse-wooled sheep there have been always known a great many breeds, most of them possessing distinct characteristics which suited the districts in which they were bred. Of the origin of these many breeds of sheep there is no record. The more distinct varieties have been known for many years. The character of each breed was well marked, and could be told by experts with certainty. But whether they are descended from distinct sources, or produced after long years by the effect of food and climate, combined with selection, is not known. During the last quarter of a century, however, a great change has taken place, and now such a thing as a pure flock of any of the old breeds of sheep is not to be found in Great Britain. Improvement by selection and crossing has been the rule, and the result has been all that the breeders could have wished.

The merino alone retains its place as a distinct breed, and all crossings with other breeds have, as a rule, resulted in disappointment. A cross with some of the coarse breeds has sometimes been attended with success, where it has been employed to breed

success, where it has been employed to breed an animal for the butcher, but the taint has, with one exception, always been found objectionable in a permanent flock. The single exception is the flock of silky Lincoln sheep, bred by Dr. Brown, which are said to be true to type. These sheep were produced by introducing a cross of merino blood into a flock of Lincoln sheep. It has always been a matter of pride with the owners of stud merino flocks to show for how many generations their flocks have existed without the taint of a cross with animals of inferior or doubtful lineage.

Until a few years ago there were only two instances on record of the sudden appearance of a distinct type of sheep, and, strange to say, one of these appeared in a carefully bred flock of pure merinos that had never been known to have a cross of any other breed. A third instance of the appearance of a distinct variety of sheep occurred about 10 years ago, in the stud flock of Mr. John L. Currie,

of Larra, of which it is the intention of the writer to give some description. As the subject has not been much studied, perhaps an account of the two previous instances will not be uninteresting.

The first instance in the history of our domestic animals of the appearance of a new variety of entirely different type to the parent stock occurred in the year 1791, when a ram lamb was born in Massachusetts, U.S.A., having short crooked legs and a long back like a turnspit dog. From this animal the otter or Ancon breed was obtained, and as they could not leap over fences it was thought they would prove valuable. The variety proved remarkably true to type, but after some years they were gradually replaced by superior sheep, and at last entirely disappeared.

The second instance was quite as well marked and of much greater value. In the year 1828 a ram lamb was born in a flock of pure merinos on the Mauchamp Farm, Commune de Javincourt (France), remarkable for its long, smooth, straight, and silky wool. M. Graux, the proprietor of the farm, established a breed of sheep from this ram, which proved true to type, never showing any disposition to return to the character of the parent flock. The original ram and his immediate offspring were of small size, with large heads, narrow chests, and long flanks, but these blemishes were removed by judicious selection. The following extracts will show how highly the new variety was estimated:—Lectures on the Exhibition of 1851—(On Wool, by Richard Owen, F.R.S.)—"The specimens of French wool selected as meriting the reward of the prize medal were No. 1,249, Le General Girod de l'Ain; No. 1,080, from the National Sheep Farm of Rambouillet; No. 354, F. Richer, pure merino wool, transmitted from Gourix Calvados. Among the sorts of wool shown in the French department were

from Gourix Calvados. Among the sorts of wool shown in the French department were specimens christened by a well skilled English expert as 'a wool of singular and peculiar properties, the hair glossy and silky, similar to mohair, retaining at the same time certain properties of the merino breed.' This wool was exhibited by M. J. L. Graux, of the farm of Manchamp, Commune de Juvincourt (Aisne), as the produce of a peculiar variety of merino breed of sheep. The jury entered into an inquiry not only into its commercial value and application, but into the particulars of the production of this new kind of wool, and found it to be one of the very few instances in which the origin of a new variety of a domestic quadruped can be satisfactorily traced, with all the circumstances attending its development well authenticated. In the year 1828, one of the ewes of the flock of merinos, on the Mauchamp Farm, produced a male lamb, which, as it grew up, became remarkable for the long, smooth, straight, and silky character of the fibre of the wool, and for the smoothness of its horns. It was of small size, and presented certain defects in its conformation, which have disappeared in its descendants. In 1829 M. Graux employed this ram, with the view of obtaining other rams having the same quality of wool. The produce of 1830 included only one ram and one ewe having the silky quality of wool. That of 1831 produced four rams and one ewe with the silky quality of wool. In 1833 the rams were sufficiently numerous to serve the whole flock. In each subsequent year the lambs have been of two kinds—one preserving the characteristics of the ancient race, only a little longer and finer in the wool; the other resembling the rams of the new breed, some of which retained the large head, long neck, narrow chest, and lean flanks of the abnormal progenitor, while others combined the ordinary and better formed body with fine silky wool. M. Graux profited by its partial resumption of the normal type, and at length succeeded in obtaining a flock combining the fine, long, silky fleece, with smaller heads, shorter necks, broader flanks, and more capacious chests. The fine silky wool of the Mauchamp merino is remarkable for its qualities as combing wool, owing to the strength as well as the length and fineness of its fibre. It is found of great value in the manufacture of Cashmere shawls, being second only to the true Cashmere fleece, and is of peculiar utility when combined with Cashmere wool, in imparting to the manufacture qualities of strength and consistence, in which Cashmere is deficient. The quantity of wool yielded by the Mauchamp merino is smaller than in the ordinary merino, but the price realised in the market is 25 per cent. above that of the best merino wools." In the report of the juries of the Paris Exhibition of 1867, the Mauchamp merino wool is again very favourably noticed, and a regret is expressed that the wool-growers of France had, from prejudice, neglected this valuable variety of merino sheep. Some articles, manufactured by M. Davin, of

Paris, from this wool were greatly admired for their beauty. From some cause or other, the French flock-masters do not seem to have estimated the new variety of merino at its true value, and it is said that the flock was destroyed during the Franco-Prussian war. The origin of the Larra merino is singularly like the two instances already mentioned.

The following sketch will show the origin of the parent flock:—In 1803 Mr. John Macarthur, then lieutenant and paymaster, went to England, and, as a special favour, was permitted to purchase a few pure Spanish merinos from the King's (George III.) private flock. At this time the exportation of merinos from Spain was a capital crime, and specimens of the breed could only be obtained by Royal favour. These sheep Mr. Macarthur brought to New South Wales, and they were the origin of the famous Camden flock. From this source have sprung nearly all the pure flocks now in Australia. About 28 years ago Mr. Currie, whose sheep were even then held in high estimation by the flock-owners of Victoria, obtained 10 rams of very high quality from Mr. Macarthur's flock. Since that time lambs appeared at intervals in Mr. Currie's flock having a fleece of a peculiar character. The wool was long in staple, straight, and of a delicate lustrous fibre. The appearance of the wool gave the idea that the sheep were of a delicate constitution, and in the majority of cases, where the peculiar character of fleece was distinctly marked, the animal was rejected from the breeding flock as being apparently of too delicate a constitution to breed from. Again and again this peculiar type of sheep appeared in the flock; and at last, about 10 years ago, a fine young ram was born, which possessed the peculiar character in such a marked degree that Mr. Currie was induced to take the matter into more serious consideration than he had hitherto done. The young ram was reserved, and a few ewes showing the peculiar character of wool were selected from the flock, in order to ascertain if the new type could be established. The result fully answered Mr. Currie's expectations. When the silky character was exhibited in the parents, it was transmitted to the offspring, and a cross with a silky ram and the pure ewes of the flock gave a great improvement in the produce. The "Larra" sheep are much more shapely in form than the ordinary merino, with a deeper chest, a well-rounded and longer frame, upon short fine legs, heavier in fleece, longer in staple, and, as far as has been observed, of a more quiet and docile

disposition than is usual with merinos. These qualities would recommend them to sheep-owners, even without the superior character of wool. In several instances where Camden sheep have been introduced into Victoria, lambs possessing the silky lustrous character

lamb possessing the silky lustrous character of wool have been born, but the owners have not taken much notice of them. In Mr. Currie's flock it seemed as if there was a persistent effort on the part of nature to produce the new variety, which, from its many high qualities, bids fair to become the "Australian merino." In the year 1871 Mr. Currie sent a couple of fleeces of the "Larra merino" wool to England, in order to have the opinions of the best experts as to its commercial value. Of this wool Messrs. John Smith and Sons, of Bradford, express the following opinion:—

"We have examined the wool sent by you, and referred to in yours of the 8th inst. We are very sure that the peculiar straight, thin, and silky fibre cannot be too highly spoken of, and would be fully appreciated in the trade. We must add that, taken with all its qualifications, it is the best sample of wool we ever saw."

Messrs. Armytage, Sanderson, Murray, and Co., London, to whom the wool was sent, forwarded the fleeces to M. Ed. Richou, and received from him the following opinion of its value:—

"Le Cateau, Dec. 1, 1871.

"J. Sanderson, Esq.

"My dear sir,—I have received your favour of the 27th November. I have examined carefully the two fleeces of Mr. Currie. They are most suitable for our purposes, and their lustre and silkiness give them an advantage upon the ordinary J.L.C. clip. I think that bales composed of such a bright wool would fetch a long price. It is a quality of great value for light colours, or to be mixed with silk. The French breed of sheep called Mauchamp had not at all the same character. It was more like goat's wool, and could not have suited our purposes. I shall be most happy to give you any other information, if you want it. Yours, &c.,

(Signed) "ED. RICHOU."

With such favourable reports as to the value of the wool, Mr. Currie was induced to pay more attention to the new type of merino. The original ram proved to be a splendidly-formed animal, with a heavier carcass than the ordinary merino sheep. The wool was longer in staple than the rest of the pure flock, and the fleece heavier. A few years' breeding proved that the type was constant, and now Mr. Currie is so convinced of the great value of this breed, that he does not hesitate to use the rams in his pure flock—a flock that has been held in the highest estimation for many years past by the flock-masters of the Australian colonies, and as the results of the last annual ram sale held in Melbourne show, still holds the premier position. The flock of "Larra" merinos now numbers about 100 ewes, and last year they clipped 8lb. 5oz. of wool, two-thirds of them having reared lambs. As a proof of their value, at the last annual ram sale held in Melbourne, a four-tooth ram bred by Mr. Currie, and got by a "Larra merino" sire, was purchased by Mr. Tobin for his Queensland flock at the high price of 355 guineas.

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Mr. Currie is of opinion that by judicious selection the peculiar character of the Larra merino will attain a much higher development than it has yet reached.

The result of this attempt to develop in a higher degree the most important industrial pursuit of the Australian colonies will be looked forward to with the greatest interest by all those having the welfare of Australia to heart.