

The Offtaking of Allan Thorburn.

A TALE OF THE CUMBERLAND SHEPHERDS.

BY J. M'CAIG.

The speckled faces and legs of Allan Thorburn's flock of Herdwicks were drawing to the center of a wind-swept knoll on the slope of Wasdale. It was always so with the Herdwicks. Ever since a wreck on the Cumberland coast had cast off the flock of wild sheep, from no man knew where, they had taught the shepherds the meaning of gusts of winds and innocent-appearing clouds, and needed no call to shelter from storms, like the more cultivated breeds towards the south or towards the borders. Their wonderful instinct had engendered with the shepherd what was almost superstition. He felt uncanny to see the silly sheep forestall his care and discretion with the approach of a storm. So would they choose a wind-blown, exposed spot, and would tramp the snow to keep above it, and with the ceasing of the storm would scatter forth again and paw and scrape their way to the scant herbage beneath the snow.

Had Allan not been troubled with other thoughts, he would have taken more account of the gathering of the flock. He arose from his seat on a stone on the side of the ghyll. It was already late afternoon, and a few preliminary snow-gusts turned to a straight-blowing north-east storm. He knew the sheep were safe in the guidance of their own instinct, and he started, with his long, swinging stride, for his mother's cottage at the foot of the slope.

Allan was troubled. There is little opportunity for cultivating versatility in the affections among the hills. Allan had not fixed his affections until he was thirty years of age, and then it was for keeps. There are few opportunities for comparison of lasses among the hills, and Bess Appleby bounded his hopes and wishes. Her father was well-to-do on a cultivated farm low down in the valley, but still in sight of the Skiddan top.

Bess was nearing twenty, and had seen few lads beyond Ned Heelis and Allan himself in anything like familiar intercourse, and Ned was only an occasional visitor, while Allan was really a neighbor. His old mother kept house for him, a mile from the Appleby farm, and Allan was valued for his company, advice and trustiness by father, mother, brothers and Bess alike. There was no better shepherd held a flock of the Herdwicks from Lord Numcaster than Allan himself, no shepherd who drew any higher money in Keswick market-place for his three-year wethers, or who was laying up a competence with more shrewdness and thrift. Though slow-going, he was held on by success, and was fond of it, and had enough



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sentiment to feel troubled with a sense of failure either in his traffic with sheep or lasses. He had gone regularly of a Saturday night to Bess' home. He and the father had talked sheep and neaps and meadows, and Allan was already tacitly if not explicitly a son, barring that he had not asked Bess.

His attentions, always undemonstrative and serious, Bess had received with undisguised pleasure. He had been her traditional escort

from Hallowe'en and harvest festivals since she was sixteen. Though he had not spoken, his resolve was clearer and his wish stronger with the approach of the Christmas time, and Bess could have no doubt of his intentions.

Ned Hallis was a suitor of a different sort—younger and not so steady. He had a taking way with the lasses, and though mothers thought him a bit harum-scarum, there was not much difference between the old lasses and the young ones. They say a woman is never too old for romance. Ned's bolder way and his gift of spontaneous compliment was no drawback to him.

It was Ned that Allan was troubled about. Nearer Bess' age, and with a blithe and witty disposition, Allan could not fail to see that she was a little more than pleased with Ned's company, and though Allan had taken Bess to Wattie Tyson's Hallowe'en dance, and brought her home, she had danced most and looked her brightest and best with Ned during the evening. When they were leaving, too, it was for Ned's joking and rather prolonged good-night that Allan had to wait, bonnet in hand, at the door.

Since then Ned's visits had been more frequent and more regular, and when both Allan and Ned were at the farmsteading of a Saturday night, it always seemed the easiest and most natural arrangement that Ned should talk most to the lass and Allan to the father. Allan would go home with an angry feeling that impertinence gains more favors from women than respect does.

And now on the hills, two days before Christmas, Allan was trying bravely to face the facts, and he was almost conscious that Bess had gone away from him. He thought that the tartan gown he had bought her at the Keswick fair, against the coming of Christmas, would please her, and he wished to make her happy. Now he had a sense of failure and was sore at heart, and the gown was only a pain to him. He had only shown it to his mother.

While Allan was making his way to his cottage, leaving his sheep to fend for themselves, as he knew they would, the gusts whistled down the ghyll or swept the heathy sides of the hill from the north-east, and when he had reached the cottage, a strong, steady, three-days storm seemed to have set in. At daylight next morning it had drifted about the house and piled up past the middle of the small windows, almost shutting out the light. So it continued through the day. In the afternoon, with a still leaden sky and swift-driving light snow, Allan decided to tramp to the Appleby homestead. There all was snug under thatch in the steaming byres, and the family were enjoying the storm as only those can who are by a warm fireside and have all housed and warm.

Stories were going of the trials of the hill shepherds in just such another storm thirteen years back. Then it was that Tammas Boothwick's dog, Shep, had held the sheep together for two days and had come to the steading to take back rescue for Tammas, wandering, snowblind and demented, in the hills. And there were other tales of sheep and shepherds and shepherd dogs.

The same afternoon came other visitors besides Allan to the Appleby's, and the tales of thirteen years ago were stopped to listen to the account of Ned Heelis. Ned had not come in the night before, and he held his flock far up in the hills. At the crest of the hill was the lad's shieling, where he slept at night, and about which his flock were held each night. The shieling had already been visited, and the sheep were scattered about, but no Ned was to be seen. The valley was being roused to search for him.

Bess' brothers, Jack and Will and Adam, were ready in a moment, with greatcoats to shut out the storm and staves to climb the hill. Allan was on his feet with the rest, and his dog, Clyde, was looking into his face for the word of command, and all were ready to start. Allan's fate was decided in that moment.

"D'ye think ye'll happen fin' him, Allan?" asked Bess.

"Like enough, lass," was all he answered, but his big, serious heart was sore with yearning and sadness as he looked at her, almost in farewell, as they quitted the house for the hills.

Spreading to right and left to take in the whole of the liny slope on which Ned grazed his sheep, men and dogs went into the teeth of the blast—Allan alone, the others in twos or threes.

"She lo'es Ned best," he muttered, and swung on in his wide shepherd's gait, almost fiercely, and wholly indifferent to the strife of the elements.

Darkness brought the party to the shieling again—all but Allan—with no sign of Ned. They could do nothing in darkness, and only waited for Allan to start back home again together and wait for to-morrow's light. Half an hour and no Allan came, then an hour. But Allan knew the hills better than any other Wasdale shepherd, and



"TAKING ORDERS."

Evan McIver, Virden, Man., and his Collies.

home they went again, guided by the blast behind them.

Next day—Christmas it was—opened calm and bright. Long ridges of snow lay within the dykes of the fields of the valley. The loans were filled, and vast heaps stood about the gates and byres and rickyards.

About noon Ned came home—his sheep were still on the hills, many smothered in the snow in the shelter of the ravines, and a few were scattered about and were pawing the scant bite. Ned's sheep were not the Herdwicks of wise instinct. On the afternoon of the storm, Ned had taken the shortest road to the alehouse of the hamlet on the opposite side of the hill, had caroused through two days of the storm among lads with no more care than himself, and had come home when the storm abated.

But poor Allan! He had found himself still saying, "She lo'es Ned best"—but with the great soul that he had, knew that her last word to him was an appeal for Ned, and he resolved to find the missing shepherd. He knew the hills so well, too, as they all said before and after as well. But it will be a long day before we can understand the discriminations that Fate makes. He had never gone towards the shieling, as the rest had; but struck across hills and ravines right about the hills, sending his faithful Clyde to right and left, up and down the slopes, away wide to find the missing shepherd. So he went while it was daylight, and afterwards into the black night, never drawing back the foot from weariness or slackening in his resolve. He could not otherwise, and so he felt.

It was to the foot of steep, towering crags, in the ruggedest gulch of the hillside, that the shepherds were led by the whines of Clyde to seek Allan Thorburn. A series of short barks, ending in a long, mournful whine, repeated again and again, forced in on the slow shepherds the eerie feeling of disaster. Allan had made his Christmas sacrifice for Bess. Home they brought him, to the cottage of the widow. He was borne to the Wasdale cemetery, and she was bereft of all she had in the world except the memory of his goodness and worth. She had intended telling Bess of the plaid gown, but matters moved o'er quick with Bess and Ned, and she held her peace and laid the gown away. They were soon married.

Ned still loved the alehouse, and his flock did not grow proportionately to his family of squalid weans. Neither was Allan's sacrifice more than a recollection to Bess or Ned. But love and life have gone this way before without it being for men and women to know why things should be so.

Paderewski, the famous musician, who has a splendid mansion-house and country home at Riond Bosson, on the banks of Lake Geneva, Switzerland, recently purchased a choice selection of Scotch black-faced sheep from the flock of Mr. Donald Gordon, Bovaglie, Aberdeenshire, to crop the grass on his parklike pastures and add beauty and interest to the surroundings.