

'Tis a Season of Plaids— Dye Ken Their Meanin'?



By Ruth Berg

Come every hill-plaid and
True heart that wears one,
Fibroch of Donald Du, 1816.—Scott.

It is going to be a plaid winter—a veritable Scotch invasion. With all their wealth or gorgeous coloring the tartans of the ancient clans of Caledonia have come to add brilliancy to the season. In gowns, in hats, in ribbons, in belts, in every conceivable form or fashion, the emblems of old Scotland are gayly flaunted. Even rain coats are of criss-cross shades and lines and the somberness of cloudy days will be brightened by these new storm-defiers.

With utter disregard of clan feeling or of the significance of the famous tartans, we ignorantly go our way, oftentimes combining the colors of several hostile tribes. In all likelihood the green and blue of the belligerent Mac-Alpine graces a jaunty hat, while the scarlet and white of the hated Stuart of the lowlands is paraded in the finest design of attractive neckwear. Imagine the astonishment of the Scottish chieftain if he could see our medley of their sacred insignias. Imagine the swartly Roderigh Vich Alpine viewing such a union of Lowland and Highland!

Glee Lass and Ross-sha, they are smoking, ja
And the best of Loch Lomond lie dead on her
side.

Widow and Saxon maid
Long shall lament our tale,
Think of Clan-Alpine with fear and with woe,
Lenox and Lovell-glen,
Snake when they hear again,
Roderigh Vich Alpine din, lo! lerne!

Oh, dear, it's just as well he's dead. Now that the wearing of the tartans means only the donning of our favorite colors and tribal sentiment counts as naught. We have even jumbled the names of the materials, for in the days of Scotland's power the plaid was really the garment and the tartan was the pattern of cloth of which it was woven.

The introduction of clanship and tartans seems to be beyond the reach of history, for even as early as the year 81, when Agricola invaded North Britain, it was inhabited by twenty-one aboriginal tribes or clans. And then again, the earliest documents and proverbs have references to clan tartans.

One extract from the accounts of the treasurer to King James III in 1471 mentions, "Ane elne and ane halve of blue tartane to lyne his gowne of cloth of gold—Halve ane elne of doble tartane to lyne ridin collars to her Lady the Queen." So we see that even at this early date the women also wore the clan insignia. The costume of the oldtime Scot was the most complete and picturesque affair imaginable. Nowadays we sometimes see at fancy dress balls and on the stage reproductions of their ancient dress, but usually the details are inaccurate and it is only by digging back into the musty records and chronicles of the ancient clans that we come across complete accounts.

In the Medieval Days.

A passage in a document of medieval times says that the men wore a plain piece of tartan from four to six yards in length and two yards broad. The plaid—pronounced played by the true Scot—was adjusted with great nicety and made to surround the waist in great folds or plaits, and was firmly bound around the loins with a leather belt in such a manner that the lowest side fell down to the middle of the knee and then, while there were foldings behind, the cloth was double before. The upper part was then fastened to the left shoulder with a large brooch or pin, so as to display to the most advantage the tastefulness of the arrangement, the two ends being some-

times allowed to hang down; but that on the right side, which was necessarily the longest, was more often tucked under the belt. In battle, in traveling and on other occasions this added much to the convenience and grace of the costume.

The bright lined hose of the modern youth, most likely originated in the gay covering that the tribesmen used for the protection of their sturdy limbs, for their stockings were of the same pattern of tartan as their plaids. The stockings were not knitted, but were cut out of the web, as is still done in the case of those worn by the common soldiers in the Highland regiments. Their garters were of rich colors and very broad. The texture was exceedingly fine, which prevented them from wrinkling, and thus they displayed the pattern to the full extent. On the occasion of an anniversary cavalcade on Christmas, when the persons of all ranks and both sexes appeared on horseback, the women, in return for knives and purses given them by the men, presented the latter with "a pair of fine garters of divers colors."

The women often wore a finer weave of the clan tartan. In Scott's "Lady of the Lake" we read of the hunter's first glimpse of the daughter of the Douglas—
A chieftain's daughter seemed the maid,
Her satin snood, her silken plaid,
Her golden brooch, such birth betrayed.
They wore the plaid tied to the

breast with a buckle of gold or silver or brass, according to the quality of the person. The material reached from the neck almost to the feet; it was plaited and was tied around the waist by a belt of leather, studded with gems or small pieces of silver.

poor and were more varied for the rich. The particular sets or patterns of tartans peculiar to each clan must have been long fixed. Every tribe and every inland differed from each other in the fancy of making plaids, as to the stripes, the breadth and the colors. The breacken of the Highlander was a sort of coat armor or tabard by which his name and clan was at once recog-

nized. But many clans had from one to five various tartans, such as the common clan tartan, the chief's tartan, worn only by himself and heir; the dress tartan, the hunting tartan and the mourning tartan. For instance, the royal clan of Stewart had four tartans; the Old Stewart, which has small squares of green and blue with crossing bars of black and red; the Royal Stewart, which is scarlet with crossing bars of green and royal blue; the Hunting Stewart, which is of a bright green with small checks of light blue and fine lines of black and red and yellow, and the Dress Stewart, better known at the present day as the "Victoria tartan," as Queen Victoria represented the Stewart family through James IV of Scotland and England, from whom she is descended. The Dress Stewart is white with bars of bright red, dull green, narrow yellow and royal blue.

The Highlanders had neither cochineal, lac dye, foreign woods nor other substances to impart various tints to their materials; but their native hills afforded articles with which they found the art of dyeing brilliant and permanent colors. With the use of herbs only in the process of dyeing they produced colors so lovely as to excite the admiration of the polished Greeks and Romans. They had a dye which rivaled the Tyrean purple; the hyacinth is said to have afforded this beautiful shade. They also produced scarlet from the limestone lichen, yellow from the bog myrtle, magenta from the dandelion, blue from the blueberry and elder and countless other shades from other plants. Many of these native dyes are still employed in the Highlands. The cleansing of the cloth, even up

to a few years ago, was conducted in a most singular manner. Six or eight or sometimes fourteen women sat down on each side of a long frame of wood which was placed on the ground. The cloth being wet, was then laid on, and the women, kneeling, rubbed it with all their strength until their arms became tired, when they sat down and applied their bare feet, singing a particular melody, the notes of which increased in loudness as the work proceeded. It is related of an English gentleman that, having accidentally looked into a cottage where the women were so engaged, he hastily retired, reporting he had seen a whole company of furious lunatics.

The Plaid Forbidden.

On August 1, 1747, after the uprising of 1745, an act was passed forbidding the wearing of the tartan or any part of a Highland dress, under penalty of six months' imprisonment for the first offense and transportation beyond seas for seven years for the second. Think of it! Seven years for wearing your family colors! And yet, we of this generation cannot begin to realize the intense loyalty and clan partisanship that the plaid betokened. No Highlander could receive the benefit of the act of indemnity without first taking the awful oath: "I do swear, and as I shall answer to God at the great day of judgment, I have not nor shall have in my possession any gun, sword, pistol, or any whatsoever, and never use tartans, plaids or any part of a Highland garb; and if I do so, may I be cursed in my undertaking, family, property, may I never see my wife and children, father, mother or relations; may I be killed in battle as a coward and lie without Christian burial in a strange land far from the graves of my forefathers and kindred; may all this come across me if I break my oath."

Later, in 1782, this severe act was repealed. When the last hope of the restoration of the Stewart dynasty was extinguished the influence of the clans was greatly weakened and the face of the country and the habits of the people had been completely changed. So, arrayed in the colors of the warriors of old Scotland, we will happily "gang our gait." The insignia of the royal Stewart will find no greater favor than the gay plaid of some mountain clan, and in many a streetcar tartans of highland and lowland will ride peacefully side by side.