

Antics of the Sheep-herd

By E. C. Gerber

Based on “The Duel” by Jorge Borges

I first heard this story from D— S—, and have since been trying to find out the deepest truth of it that I could. It involves two men, I will call them Isaac and Gregor, for their names have never been consistent across narrators. Like many men of their time, they were shepherds. Now that the story has been told to me so many times, in so many manners, having studied all angles, I will tell it to you.

The land was covered with turf and mounded hills. The land was thawing, and the lambing was starting to begin. Isaac and Gregor were found together in the greasy corner of the boarding house, and a debate had begun. As goes the worst of arguments, when it is clear neither party is truly for their side, yet defend it with spit, the men were on their feet. Soon the two were wrestling in the mud outside, and knives were pulled. Isaac was a much shorter man, but stalky and, like his contemporaries, strong enough to best the ram and wolf. The gathered crowd broke them away from each other as they hissed and spat.

The land was covered in flowers now, and the season was summer. Now the men were found together standing before each other at the nape of a mountain. The path up to the pass was wide as a single sheep, and treacherous against the not nimble. Around them the sheep gathered anxiously—they had been hefted around this mountain, and the lowlands were getting hot and dry. It would take a day of steep hiking, slow by the steps of the nervous queue, to reach the pass. Neither man would step from his way, and so they stood. It was morning, and the fog drifted about in ribbons. Gregor lifted from his bag a larger, wooden pipe, and stuffed it full. He did not sit to enjoy the pipe smoke, and did not offer any to the enemy. The other man pulled out his own, which was smaller, yet gilded with lacquer and fine lines of bronze. Without much consideration for the other, they shared a smoke.

One man spoke, “I count few ewes, lost them during the birth, did you?”

The other said, “And before you knew the count?”

And so it continued, “I can tell a flock of bachelors.”

To that, the other puffed his pipe, and blew the smoke out of his nose.

“The sun has bit your eyes,” he said.

“I can smell it, then,” laughed the other.

“This side of the mountain is mine, perhaps ask my sheep if you know them so dearly. Go on.”

“You prefer them to speak for you?”

It was now that one of the men, the one so ridiculed and insulted, blew the contents of his pipe out into the downwind, sending ash into the face of the other.

“Now I have spoken, did you hear well?” He hoped so, as he could not do the trick again.

This was simply too much for the other, and in the meadow below the hairpin the two men had at each other amongst the animals. They had enough when they both lay about broken and aching. Neither rose for minutes, until Isaac rolled onto his belly, pushing himself up. He gathered his sheep and went up the path. It was not long before he tired and had to sit. Long down the mountain’s path he saw the backs of sheep, and further down nothing but green path. The morning fog was waning and the ribbons ripped under bright sunshine. He turned and got to his feet. He knew this path, its length, its elbows and straights. Perhaps he thought that the path *was* his, as he had won it from the interloper. He knew that he

could not be this tired this early, and would have to take it slow and into the night. He walked for four hours and sat again, looking back down the path, over the backs of his sheep, and saw the slow trail of churned dust drifting out over it. He saw it mixing lower down with the dust of a different line, a different flock, who he now realised he was sharing the trail with. With this, he stood up and walked faster. *But no,* he thought, *He will not make it up before night.* And with that, he again felt that he had bested the other.

Now the night was falling, growing cold, and Isaac stood quivering in the lap of the pass. He peaked down the side he'd come up, and all was quiet and motionless. He lay about his animals and closed his eyes.

Gregor sat in the darkness on the slope of the mountain, his sheep looking over each other's shoulders uneasily. They still stood upon the path, witnesses to the fading light of the valley below, where they had been during the winter. They watched there, maybe mournfully, and did not notice the disappearance of their shepherd as he crept through the undergrowth, up the mountain. Hours passed, some laid down to rest, others stood about stupidly. The night was half spent when the last sheep closed its eyes, and still the man who watched over them was nowhere to be found. Far above, along a crooked ridge walked Gregor, who was covered in burrs, scratches—some blood dripped from above his eye brow and his eyes were wide in the dark. He knew the mountain well, even beyond its path. He knew where the trail widened into the pass, the meadows behind it, and the forest before it. Slowly the ridge began to slope downwards, and the trees became more dense. He fought through them, and scared himself with the noise of it. He continued through the shadow forest, which grew less tight, then suddenly he stepped into the far end of a large meadow, in which lay about like stones many sheep and one man. Gregor stood and stared at them. The opening of the path back down sat to his left, them to his right. He stood there for some while, and did not move. He was tired now and thought of his sheep alone upon the mountain side, and felt dread, knowing that he would have to not sleep again for another night. Then he turned right. He reached the peaceful flock, looking down at the face of the other man. He saw the youth in it, for the man was younger than he. It looked clean despite the labor and heat of the previous day. He reached for his knife, but hesitated. He walked from the man and instead cut the rope that had tied the sheep together as they slept.

It is a strange query to wake and not know if one is still dreaming. Isaac looked about his surroundings; the morning soaked meadow, the pine smell, the buzzing fly, but no bleats. He sprang up, whistling and calling for the flock. He ran to the place that he had tied them, and saw the rope had been sheared cleanly by a knife. A paleness went over his face as a thought presented itself. He ran across the meadow and reached the trailhead. He scanned it and saw nothing. No cloud of dust, no tired-eyed animals, no other man. In the path-mud cloven prints had worked downwards quietly last night while he slept; he saw them mixed in with the print of a large sandal. He gathered his things and went down the way he came.

Gregor was tired now; he knew it like he had never known it before. He had led the enormous queue of animals, one abreast, over root and stream, and still they had not reached the bottom, into the freedom of the valley. The sunrise had placed stress upon his heart and he knew now that he no longer trusted his midnight judgement. Yet they continued, the sheep and him, onto flatter and flatter ground, until they swung out into the valley and could see foothills and chimney smoke. At this, Gregor nearly kneeled in exhaustion, and sat for a moment under a tree. It was an older tree, and its leaves were beginning to yellow. He let fall the rope that he'd used to lead the sheep. He let his eyes droop and close, and soon he was fast asleep.

A few days later, a woman, who had been walking along the road, burst into the office of the elderman and, without a hint of unseriousness, told him the story of a long line of sheep, seemingly without a shepherd at all, wandering across the valley. A butcher's apprentice told the butcher a similar tale. The curious matter was, of course, that the sheep in the line bore both the branding of Isaac and of Gregor.

Isaac reached the bottom of the path, and swung out into the valley. He saw the other man, stretched out in between gnarled roots. He saw also that the man was alone, with no sheep of his own. He thought to wake the man, but, looking at the face of him, tanned and dirty, scratched and scabbed, filled him instead with some other feeling. He crouched down close to his face, grabbed a fistful of hair, and slit the man's throat as he slept. Perhaps it is what Gregor should have done.