



## THE LOST SHEEP

It was tired of being always in the fold. It was tired of following always where the Good Shepherd led.

Out yonder, by the distant hills, the grass looked sweeter, and the water clearer, and the sun warmer. It was sure it could find better pasture by itself. So one morning, when the gate was opened and the Shepherd led out the sheep, instead of following Him like the rest, it stole away by itself.

At first, it was afraid. He would miss it and bring it back. But the fear grows less as it wanders farther and farther away from the fold, and at last when it feels quite safe, it begins to gambol about and enjoy its freedom. How nice it is to be able to do just as it likes! How much fresher the grass is here than it is at home! How silly the other sheep are not to come out here and enjoy themselves!

The sun rises higher and higher, it is far, far away now; far beyond the tinkling bells, beyond the sound of the Good Shepherd's voice. The sky is bright and the birds sing gaily, and the mossy banks are sweet and fresh. Down the pleasantest paths it wanders, and through the gayest meadows. When the sun is high in the heavens, it drinks at the cool brooks and lies down to rest in the shade. And then on again, and on up the purple hills into the valley again; and through the long grass where it makes a path for itself.

The afternoon wears on and evening comes; the sun is sinking in the west. The air grows chilly, and as the shadows creep up in the sky, a change comes over the strayed sheep. How cold it is. How dark it is getting. How fast the night draws on! Had it not better get back to the fold? But there's no light for that now. Weary and frightened, it makes its way to a wood. There will be shelter there, and in the morning it will go home as fast as it can. If only it were there now, safe and warm! Oh why had it come away? The far-off grass was not so sweet after all and the Good Shepherd's stream was quite as fresh as those out here. The wood is damp and cold, but it seems safer than outside and the poor tired sheep creeps under the long grass and tries, to hide itself. Hark! What is that sound in the distance? Often and often when safely folded at night the sheep has heard it, but not as it hears it now. What would they care in the fold for the bark of the prowling wolf without, when they were safe within and the Good Shepherd was with them?

Again that horrid sound! And now it is nearer. The terrified sheep bounds forward to find a safer shelter, and is caught in a thorny thicket where the long branches hold it fast. It struggles to get free and the wolf is very near. But the more it tries, the closer those cruel thorns press round, till panting and bleeding, it falls among them and waits for the next hungry cry. Listen! There is another sound. Not the howl of an enemy, but a voice calling out in the distance. It is far away, but the lost sheep knows it well. Oh, has He come out to seek it and will He be in time? Has He come to look for a lamb that, has wandered away from Him so far; that has not been among His most faithful ones; that has so often pretended not to hear when He called, and has not followed where He led? Has the Good Shepherd left the ninety-nine and come so far for one like this? It is too weak to go out and meet Him; it must lie helpless here and die unless He finds it soon. Will He know where to seek it? Will He hear its pleading cry?

The wolf has heard, and with a loud bark comes hurrying on. The poor sheep waits for it to come and calls faintly for its Shepherd. Oh that it had never left His side! How good He has always been to it! What care He takes of His sheep - He knows every one of them, and one by one counts them morning and evening as He leads them out of the fold and leads them back. He is ready to give His life for His sheep. More than once a panther has cleared the stone wall of the fold crowned with its slumps of thorn bushes or a robber has climbed up and crept in under cover of darkness and the Good Shepherd has defended the flock and drawn upon Himself all the wounds to save His sheep. Oh why has it not known Him better and loved Him more? Is it not too late now? There is a stir in the branches. Who is making His way through the thicket straight to the poor lost lamb? Straight through the prickly briars that press around and wound

Him on every side. They pierce His brow and wound His hands and feet, but He does not mind them. His eyes are fixed on the wanderer. "It is I, fear not," and a smile lights up His tired face as He hears its low bleat of welcome. Now He is kneeling by it and gently pressing back the thorns. Hark, there is a snapping of branches, a spring in the thicket and a howl of disappointed rage. It is the wolf at last; oh those dreadful eyes - how they glare at the poor lamb like lamps of fire. But it does not fear them for He is here who loves it and will keep it from harm. Tenderly He lifts it and lays it on His shoulders and bids it rest on Him and fear not. And so bending beneath His burden He gathers His robe around Him and sets forth on the journey home. The wolf cowers before Him as He passes. Just at the last moment He has robbed it of its prey. Fear and hate are in its eyes and if it dared, it would spring up and seize that defenseless creature even now.

Out on the bleak moorland where the winds sweep past and toss His raiment and His hair, through the meadows where the strayed sheep wandered lazily only a few hours before — are they the same that looked so golden in the golden sun? Past the brook where it slaked its thirst at midday and the mossy banks where it rested and gamboled up and down the slope's of the silent hills. It did not know till now how far it had wandered. Straying away was pleasant and easy work but what trial and pain it caused those aching feet. Oh how ungrateful it has been to Him, who has loved it so and He has no reproach for it. Nay, there is a continual smile on His face as He makes His way over the stony ground that cuts His feet at every step. Now and again His eyes turn tenderly to His wounded lamb, and a silent pressure tells it how glad He is to feel it near Him and how willingly He bears the labor of bringing it back to the fold. It must be midnight now but the moon is up and the trees and jutting rocks stand out almost as distinctively as in the daytime. Surely home must be near. Is not this the further side of the hill that shelters the fold? He climbs it wearily. Now they have reached the top.

Yes, there it is lying quietly in the moonlight — the fold that the poor wanderer never thought to see again. How glad it will be to be safe within once more. He descends the slope now His hand is on the gate and now the ninety-nine that have been waiting for Him press around to welcome Him and the willful one that has cost Him so dear.

Will it be willful any more? Will it think itself wiser than the rest? Will it follow at a distance now? Oh if there is one of the sheep that knows Him better than the others and loves Him more, that is always listening for the sound of His Voice, that loves the fold and is content - even more than content - surely it is that hundredth sheep that was once so far away.



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