

Shepherd's Boy

By Richard Middleton

The path climbed up and up and threatened to carry me over the highest point of the downs till it faltered before a sudden outcrop of chalk and swerved round the hill on the level. I was grateful for the respite, for I had been walking all day and my knapsack was growing heavy. Above me in the blue pastures of the skies the cloud-sheep were grazing, with the sun on their snowy backs, and all about me the grey sheep of earth were cropping the wild pansies that grew wherever the chalk had won a covering of soil.

Presently I came upon the shepherd standing erect by the path, a tall, spare man with a face that the sun and the wind had robbed of all expression. The dog at his feet looked more intelligent than he. "You've come up from the valley," he said as I passed; "perhaps you'll have seen my boy?"

"I'm sorry, I haven't," I said, pausing.

"Sorrow breaks no bones," he muttered, and strode away with his dog at his heels. It seemed to me that the dog was apologetic for his master's rudeness.

I walked on to the little hill-girt village, where I had made up my mind to pass the night. The man at the village shop said he would put me up, so I took off my knapsack and sat down on a sackful of cattle cake while the bacon was cooking.

"If you came over the hill, you'll have met shepherd," said the man, "and he'll have asked you for his boy."

"Yes, but I hadn't seen him."

The shopman nodded. "There are clever folk who say you can see him, and clever folk who say you can't. The simple ones like you and me, we say nothing, but we don't see him. Shepherd hasn't got no boy."

"What! Is it a joke?"

"Well, of course it may be," said the shopman guardedly, "though I can't say I've heard many people laughing at it yet. You see, shepherd's boy he broke his neck. . .

"That was in the days before they built the fence above the big chalk-pit that you passed on your left coming down. A dangerous place it used to be for the sheep, so shepherd's boy he used to lie along there to stop them dropping into it, while shepherd's dog he stopped them from going too far. And shepherd he used to come down here and have his glass, for he took it then like you or me. He's blue ribbon now.

"It was one night when the mists were out on the hills, and maybe shepherd had had a glass too much, or maybe he got a bit lost in the smoke. But when he went up there to bring them home, he starts driving them into the pit as straight as could be. Shepherd's boy he hollered out and ran to stop them, but four-and-twenty of them went over, and the lad he went with them. You mayn't believe me, but five of them weren't so much as scratched, though it's a sixty feet drop. Likely they fell soft on top of the others. But shepherd's boy he was done.

"Shepherd he's a bit spotty now, and most times he thinks the boy's still with him. And there are clever folk who'll tell you that they've seen the boy helping shepherd's dog with the sheep. That would be a ghost now, I shouldn't wonder. I've never seen it, but then I'm simple, as you might say.

“But I’ve had two boys myself, and it seems to me that a boy like that, who didn’t eat and didn’t get into mischief, and did his work, would be the handiest kind of boy to have about the place.”