

Katie: Sheep Dog



By EDWIN L. SABIN

NINE thousand feet up on a Colorado mesa was where I met Katie the sheep dog. While I was chatting with her master, and she peacefully dozed, a party of sheep decided that they would start out exploring.

The herder saw and stood up. "Hi!" he shouted. "Where you going? You'd better turn back there!"

The band stopped short and gazed at him. They plainly hesitated. Then the old ewe which was leading gave a defiant shake of her head, whereupon, followed by the others, she impudently moved on.

"Katie," said the herder softly, "do you see those sheep, and what they're doing? Go after them, Katie. Turn them back. Show them what's what."

Away sped Katie, with all her might, straight for the errand band; and in the time that it takes for the telling she had launched herself in front of the band. The very sound of her, crashing through the brush, had made them stop—they suspected what was about to happen. Then, at first glimpse of her, in a panic they wheeled like a cavalry squad and rushed for the main herd. Across their heels darted Katie, back and forth. One little lamb must have lost its wits, for it insisted upon running in the wrong direction. Katie made after it. She tried to turn it right; but it was as obstinate as any pig; until finally, exasperated, Katie seized it by the nape of the neck and gave a good nip. Then Katie looked back at us.

The herder raised high his right arm, as signal for her to cease. Then he brought his arm down and briskly slapped his thigh. Katie understood.

Sending Off the Dog

WHEN the sheep were grazing too far up the valley, or were getting too scattered, away out of sight he would send Katie, to turn them and round them up. "Here, Katie!" he would say, waking her instantly. He would wave his arm, indicating the direction. "Go way round them, Katie,—way round!"

Off would dash Katie in a headlong run, disappearing amid the timber or round a hill. But all along her course we would see the sheep scuttling in from outlying points,—twos and threes and eights and tens of them, old and young,—until the herd was compact once more. Presently, perhaps opposite to us, there would be Katie, standing and gazing for further instructions. The herder would slap his thigh and signal her in.

One might talk to Katie just as to a human being. "Now, Katie," would instruct the herder. "I want you to herd the sheep from that rim rock yonder to the timber. Don't let them stray outside."

Yes, Katie understood. She sat and watched the sheep. The herder went to sleep. Katie made an occasional circuit, and if any sheep were found beyond the rim rock, or in the timber, they were sent scurrying back.

Or the herder would say, "Katie, there's a lamb there I want to catch; but we'll let the ewe alone."

Once Katie knew which lamb it was, she would pay attention to no other, nor would she pay attention to its mother the ewe. That one lamb, in a bunch of a thousand other lambs, she would stick to unerringly, until with her assistance the herder had caught it.

Monopolized Affection

INTELLIGENT and lovable as Katie was, and much as she solicited it, I was not allowed to pet her.

"I'd rather you'd cuff her when she comes near you," said the herder.

This seems strange; for with most men it is, "Love me, love my dog"; but the herder explained that he wanted his dog attached to him only. They were alone together, and it was necessary that Katie mind him absolutely, and be his second self, with thoughts for no other person. A dog like Katie is extremely sensitive; a cross word will cut her to the heart. To strike a sheep dog is sometimes to lose its friendship forever, and even to drive it away to other quarters. It is this sensitiveness that marks acute intelligence.

Were I to be kind to Katie after he had scolded her, I might break the harmony that existed between her and her master, and work injury without meaning to. So, although it made me feel mean, while I was in the camp I paid no compliments to Katie in her hearing, and did not suffer her to snuggle up against me, and never patted her; and, astonished and hurt, she came to the conclusion that her master was the only person for her, after all.

But how he loved her! They were alone together, in the sage brush by day and in the tent by night, out there on the great western range. He fed her the best that his menu produced. He talked to her, and she to him. And he put his arms about her silky neck and kissed her, and she kissed him back.

"Why don't you have another dog to help her?" I asked once when she was particularly footsore at the close of a hard day.

"No," he replied. "We sheep herders have a saying 'One dog is a good dog; two dogs are half a dog; three dogs are no dog at all.' Katie and I can do the work; can't we, Katie?"

And Katie laid her head in his lap.



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