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## SHORTGRASS

In the next room, my neighbor Goat Whiskers the Younger is performing in grandiose style. We are in the process of marking his lambs. Whiskers is taking the high percentage crop as a special favor from the Maker to continue his ranch operations in spite of the cow depression.

Four short hours ago, Young Whiskers wasn't in a jolly humor. Right after we counted the first bunch of ewes, he took on a sullen that a mule skinner would have abandoned as hopeless.

The count was down 25 head from the last gathering. In a 3000 acre pasture, six mounted men had missed the sheep. Whiskers was taking big exception to the miscue. You'd have thought that the 25 head were show stock headed for the big exhibition at Denver.

To take the pressure off his hands, I took the blame. It was my fault. I never had helped work that country in the dark. I must have missed the sheep when I was striking matches to check the navigation gearings by my watch.

Like I told Young Whiskers, the glare from a match temporarily blinds a man. Right before dawn, poor light plus the shadows account for many a soured roundup.

We stood around the corrals discussing where to go back and look. Nothing I said suited anyone. Two miles of the pasture ran parallel to the railroad. I figured that I we acted fast enough we could get a hold of the station agent. The station agent could wire ahead to the engineer on the morning run. When the train passed through the pasture, then the engineer could scare the sheep from the brush with his whistle.

Sure, it was a new idea. People who don't live on the railroad tracks couldn't use it at all, but I couldn't see why we couldn't try. Those old ewes run off at the sound of horseshoes on rocks. Why wouldn't the rumble of the rails and the blast from a diesel horn do the job better?

Also in our favor were about a half dozen hunting blinds. While we were waiting for the train, every man would have time to climb up in the stands and be ready to spot the sheep. Firewatchers up in the northwest don't go around riding a horse looking for smoke. Scouting for sheep doesn't have to be agony. Bosses so old fashioned that they want to ride and ride, back and forth through the brush, should sign on as museum curators. This is the jet era, not the dawning of the dark ages.

Whiskers acted mighty rude. He would talk to the other men like I was back at the house. Statements such as, "I suppose even on the Supreme Court bench there are a few smart alects," or, "Saddle blankets in another five years will have to be made of tea napkins, so the cowboys will have something to use for their morning break."

His sarcasm didn't burn a hair. Whiskers was suffering withdrawal symptoms from having quit smoking cigars. Mrs. Whiskers had socked his 15 year habit into permanent limbo. He didn't care about the sheep. What he cared about was the void that system was experiencing from doing without his stogies.

The dawn patrol stationed in the darkest part of Calcutta would have failed to skylight sheep in that brush. Buck lambs are only discounted ten cents a pound. Whishers just wanted to share his smoking problem. The next time we help him, I'm going to bring along a carbide lantern like miners use in their work.