

Mitu Tega returned to the house much annoyed. As he entered his wife asked him:

"Well, has he not turned up yet?"

"No, not to-day either."

"This is what happens when you rely on an unknown man, a stranger. Suppose he never comes. God forbid that he should go off with the whole herd!"

Tega did not reply. He sat motionless in the silent veranda, which gradually grew dark with shadows of the evening mist, and pondered. Of course such things did happen; he might have taken the goats and gone off, in which case let him find him who can! Where could one look for him? Whither could one follow him?

And as he meditated thus he seemed to see the shepherd before his eyes; he called to mind the first day he had seen him; a terrible man, like a wild man from the woods, with a great moustache lost in a hard, black beard, which left only his eyes and cheek-bones visible. He came into him, and without looking him in the face, said:

"I have heard--some people told me that you want a man to tend the bucks. Take me, I am a shepherd."

Tega gave him one look, he was just the kind of man he wanted. He asked him:

"Where do you come from?"

"I come--well, from Blatza. Toli--Toli the shepherd--I have been with many other goat owners."

Tega looked at him again, considered a little, and said:

"Good, I'll take you; may you prove honest, for, look, many a man has cheated me, and many a man has stolen from me up to now."

And so he engaged him. Toli stayed with Tega, and no one could have conducted himself better.

A month later they went together to the Salonica district, where they bought goats, over eight hundred head. When it was time to return, Tega--for fear of attack by brigands--went ahead secretly, leaving Toli to follow on alone with the herd. The days slipped by--one week, two--Toli did not put in an appearance. What could have happened? Many ideas passed through Tega's brain. Especially after what his wife had said. At night he could not sleep. He dozed for a while, and then woke again, with his mind on the shepherd, tormenting himself, until the crowing of the cocks heralded the dawn. Then he got up; and, as he was short and plump, he took a staff in his hand, and proceeded to the nearest hill whence could be seen the country opening out as flat as the palm of a hand.

At that hour the first blush of dawn glowed in the east. And slowly, slowly rose the sun. Round, purple, fiery, it lit first the crests of the mountains, then flashed its rays into the heart of the valleys; the window-panes in the village suddenly caught the fiery light; the birds began to fly; on the ground, among the glistening dew, flowers raised their heads out of the fresh grass, a wealth of daisies and buttercups like little goblets of gold. But Mitu Tega had no time for such things. His eyes were searching the landscape. Something was moving yonder--a cloud of dust.

"The herd, it is the herd!" murmured Tega.

He could hear the light, soft tinkle of the bells, sounding melodiously in the spring morning. And see, see--the herd drew near,