

## Counting sheep

Laurence could not get to sleep. He lay awake, wondering whether burglars would come in through the window, and how Santa Claus would get down the chimney if he had eaten too much for tea, and whether he had closed the bag of forgotten words: for, if he had not, they might even now be escaping down the stairs and down into the street.

Finally, he crept downstairs and told his parents:

'I can't sleep, mummy'.

His father jumped up out of his chair.

'You come back upstairs with me,' he growled, 'And we'll get you off to sleep no bother'.

So, hand in hand, they went back upstairs; Laurence jumped back into bed, and his father told him a story about the Red Elephant. And at the end of the story, his father's eyes were closing, and his head was nodding. But Laurence was still wide awake.

'Right,' mumbled his father, suddenly opening his eyes, 'Now you're going to lie there quietly, and count sheep. And when you've counted all the sheep, you'll be fast asleep.'

His father stumped off downstairs again.

Laurence lay in his bed. He looked under his bed for a book to read, but his mother had put them all away on the shelves. He got up quietly and peeped out of the curtains, and saw the moon rising over the buildings opposite, big and not quite round: someone had bitten a chunk out of it. He jumped back into bed. Count sheep, his father had said. So he closed his eyes tight shut, drew himself a picture of a sheep, and started.

'One sheep'

'Two sheep'

'Three sheep'

'Four sheep'

As he counted he saw the sheep gathering in the field, one by one, running this way and that with their tails thumping about wildly, some of them looking like dirty rugs, others nice and clean.

'Twenty-seven sheep'

'Twenty-eight sheep'

'Twenty-nine sheep'

By the time he got to the eighty-seventh sheep, which turned out to be a lamb bleating madly for its mother, the whole field was full, chock-a-block, with the woolly creatures. He had to open a gap in the fence into the next field and let some of them through. There was a delay for several minutes while Laurence's sheep-dog rounded up a few of them and herded them through into the next field, and Laurence had to step in with his shepherd's crook to stop all the others from following.

'Two hundred and thirty sheep'

'Two hundred and thirty-one sheep'

'Two hundred and thirty-two sheep'

By now, the noise of baaing and mehing was tremendous. Laurence felt sure that his parents must hear and come upstairs to tell him off.

'Shhh!' he whispered urgently at the sheep. They quietened down, and turned to stare at him. 'If you make too much noise, I'll have to start again!'

'Well,' said one of them, with big horns and a woolly coat that looked as if it had been dragged through a hedge, with sticks and rather dirty things attached, 'Why don't we help you?'

'Sheep can't count,' said Laurence, laughing. 'I'm the one that does the counting!'

'Oh really?' said the sheep in a haughty voice. 'Just watch us.' And with that the noise really began.

'Fifteen!' 'Three!' 'One hundred and forty-seven!' 'Eighty-two!' All the sheep were shouting out their numbers at the same time, and it sounded as bad as children in the playground. No, worse even than that.

'Stop! Be quiet!', whispered Laurence urgently. 'Stop! Quiet!'

The noise subsided. The sheep looked at him suspiciously.

'If you really must count,' he continued, 'Count one at a time, and start at number one'

'Start at number one?' exclaimed the big sheep, 'But that's silly! I'm the most important sheep in this field, and my number is seventeen. Then my brother here should come next and he is number - what number are you, Uriah? Yes, sixty-eight. No, no, we can't start at number one. Whatever next!'

'Well, that's the way you do it, when you count. You start at one, then you go on to two, then three, four, five and so on.'

The sheep just looked at him in bewilderment, as if he was mad. Finally, the big sheep gave a laugh. 'Well, young man, what silly things you do say. I don't know what they teach you in school, but sheep have always counted, and it always works best this way. Now you just be quiet, and we'll count for you'

Laurence shrugged his shoulders in despair, then snuggled down to watch the sheep make a mess of it all.

'OK then, off we go!', said number seventeen.

And off they went again. It was a jumble of baaing, bleating and

'Seventeen!' 'Sixty-eight!' 'Two hundred and thirteen!' 'One hundred and ninety-nine!' 'Six!'

with the sheepdog barking in his confusion, and the lost lambs calling for their mothers, with no idea at all what their numbers were. After a while, the noise died down again, apart from the odd

'Two hundred and thirteen!'

from one sheep who had not realised she was only supposed to call her number once.

'Well,' said Laurence from under his covers, 'That was a real mess wasn't it?'

'What do you mean?' exclaimed sheep seventeen angrily, 'We did it exactly right! Every number was called, and we're all nicely counted now, thank you. Aren't we?'

All the sheep baaed in agreement, even number two hundred and thirteen.

Laurence sighed. Counting sheep was no fun when the sheep counted.

'Well then,' he said finally, still with his eyes tightly closed, 'Can you please leave? I want to get some sleep tonight.'

'If that's the way you feel about it,' said the sheep, quite insulted, 'Then of course we'll leave.'

The sheep all began to move towards the gate of the first field, the sheepdog watching them intently. At the gate, number seventeen turned and said:

'Do you want us to count ourselves out?'

'No,' shouted Laurence. And fell asleep.