

# To the High Mountains

by John Muir *from My First Summer in the Sierra*

*John Muir was one of the foremost American conservationists. In 1869 he went with a group of shepherds who were taking a flock of sheep to summer pasture in the Sierra Nevada mountains. In this passage, the shepherds try to get the sheep to cross a river. The man named Don, who Muir also calls "the Don," is the sheep owner, Don Delaney. "Don Quixote" is a nickname Muir uses for Delaney. Don Quixote was a character in a Spanish novel who was famous for fighting imaginary enemies.*

-----  
July 14, 1869

The drivers and dogs had a lively, laborious time getting the sheep across the creek, the second large stream thus far that they have been compelled to cross without a bridge; the first being the North Fork of the Merced near Bower Cave. Men and dogs, shouting and barking, drove the timid, water-fearing creatures in a close crowd against the bank, but not one of the flock would launch away. While thus jammed, the Don and the shepherd rushed through the frightened crowd to stampede those in front, but this would only cause a break backward, and away they would scamper through the stream-bank trees and scatter over the rocky pavement. Then with the aid of the dogs the runaways would again be gathered and made to face the stream, and again the compacted mass would break away, amid wild shouting and barking that might well have disturbed the stream itself and marred the music of its falls, to which visitors no doubt from all quarters of the globe were listening. "Hold them there! Now hold them there!" shouted the Don; "the front ranks will soon tire of the pressure, and be glad to take to the water, then all will jump in and cross in a hurry." But they did nothing of the kind; they only avoided the pressure by breaking back in scores and hundreds, leaving the beauty of the banks sadly trampled.

If only one could be got to cross over, all would make haste to follow; but that one could not be found. A lamb was caught, carried across, and tied to a bush on the opposite bank, where it cried piteously for its mother. But though greatly concerned, the mother only called it back. That play on maternal affection failed, and we began to fear that we should be forced to make a long roundabout drive and cross the wide-spread tributaries of the creek in succession. This would require several days, but it had its advantages, for I was eager to see the sources of so famous a stream. Don Quixote, however, determined that they must ford just here, and immediately began a sort of siege by cutting down slender pines on the bank and building a corral barely large enough to hold the flock when well pressed together. And as the stream would form one side of the corral he believed that they could easily be forced into the water.

In a few hours the enclosure was completed, and the silly animals were driven in and rammed hard against the brink of the ford. Then the Don, forcing a way through the compacted mass, pitched a few of the terrified unfortunates into the stream by main strength; but instead of crossing over, they swam about close to the bank, making desperate attempts to get back into the flock. Then a dozen or more were shoved off,

and the Don, tall like a crane and a good natural wader, jumped in after them, seized a struggling wether, and dragged it to the opposite shore. But no sooner did he let it go than it jumped into the stream and swam back to its frightened companions in the corral, thus manifesting sheep-nature as unchangeable as gravitation. Pan with his pipes would have had no better luck, I fear. We were now pretty well baffled. The silly creatures would suffer any sort of death rather than cross that stream. Calling a council, the dripping Don declared that starvation was now the only likely scheme to try, and that we might as well camp here in comfort and let the besieged flock grow hungry and cool, and come to their senses, if they had any. In a few minutes after being thus let alone, an adventurer in the foremost rank plunged in and swam bravely to the farther shore. Then suddenly all rushed in pell-mell together, trampling one another under water, while we vainly tried to hold them back. The Don jumped into the thickest of the gasping, gurgling, drowning mass, and shoved them right and left as if each sheep was a piece of floating timber. The current also served to drift them apart; a long bent column was soon formed, and in a few minutes all were over and began baaing and feeding as if nothing out of the common had happened. That none were drowned seems wonderful. I fully expected that hundreds would gain the romantic fate of being swept into Yosemite over the highest waterfall in the world.

**Questions**

1. What was one of the shepherds' methods used to get the sheep to cross the river?
  
2. What does Muir mean by this: "amid wild shouting and barking that might well have disturbed the stream itself and marred the music of its falls, to which visitors no doubt from all quarters of the globe were listening."
  
3. Give three different adjectives or adjective phrases that Muir uses to describe the sheep.
  
4. What does this tell the reader about why the sheep wouldn't cross: "In a few minutes after being thus let alone, an adventurer in the foremost rank plunged in and swam bravely to the farther shore."

---

**Vocabulary List**

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. Laborious
2. Marred
3. Maternal
4. Siege
5. Rammed
6. Baffled
7. Pell-mell

---

**Context Clues**

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

1. “The drivers and dogs had a lively, **laborious** time getting the sheep across the creek...”

- a. easy    b. difficult    c. fun    d. long

2. “...amid wild shouting and barking that might well have disturbed the stream itself and **marred** the music of its falls...”

- a. scarred    b. barred    c. guard    d. tarred

3. “That play on **maternal** affection failed, and we began to fear that we should be forced to make a long roundabout drive and cross the wide-spread tributaries of the creek in succession.”

- a. physical    b. emotional    c. fatherly    d. motherly

4. “Don Quixote, however, determined that they must ford just here, and immediately began a sort of **siege** by cutting down slender pines on the bank and building a corral barely large enough to hold the flock when well pressed together.”

- a. attack    b. fight    c. blockade    d. building

5. “In a few hours the enclosure was completed, and the silly animals were driven in and **rammed** hard against the brink of the ford.”

- a. forced    b. pulled    c. attacked    d. isolated

6. “We were now pretty well **baffled**.”

- a. tired    b. lonely    c. confused    d. annoyed

7. “Then suddenly all rushed in **pell-mell** together, trampling one another under water, while we vainly tried to hold them back.

- a. happily    b. wildly    c. in a row    d. calmly