In this folktale from Tuscany, a region of Italy, a shepherd tries to stay a step ahead of March weather. Read the folktale and then answer the questions that follow.

March and the Shepherd

Retold by Domenico Vittorini

One morning at the very beginning of spring, a shepherd led his sheep to graze, and on the way he met March.

“Good morning,” said March. “Where are you going to take your sheep to graze today?”

“Well, March, today I am going to the mountains.”

“Fine, Shepherd. That’s a good idea. Good luck.” But to himself March said, “Here’s where I have some fun, for today I’m going to fix you.”

And that day in the mountains the rain came down in buckets. It was a veritable deluge. The shepherd, however, had watched March’s face very carefully and noticed a mischievous look on it. So instead of going to the mountains, he had remained in the plains. In the evening, upon returning home, he met March again.

“Well, Shepherd, how did it go today?”

“It couldn’t have been better. I changed my mind and went to the plains. A very beautiful day. Such a lovely warm sun.”

“Really? I’m glad to hear it,” said March, but he bit his lip in vexation. “Where are you going tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow I’m going to the plains, too. With this fine weather, I would be crazy if I went to the mountains.”

“Oh, really? Fine! Farewell.”

And they parted.

But the shepherd didn’t go to the plains again. He went to the mountains. And on the plains March brought rain and wind and hail—a punishment indeed from heaven. In the evening he met the shepherd homeward bound.

“Good evening, Shepherd. How did it go today?”

“Very well indeed. Do you know? I changed my mind again and went to the mountains after all. It was heavenly there. What a day! What a sky! What a sun!”

“I’m really happy to hear it, Shepherd. And where are you going tomorrow?”

“Well, tomorrow I’m going to the plains. I see dark clouds over the mountains. I wouldn’t want to find myself too far from home.”
To make a long story short, whenever the shepherd met March, he always told him the opposite of what he planned to do the next day, so March was never able to catch him. The end of the month came, and on the last day, the thirtieth, March said to the shepherd, “Well, Shepherd, how is everything?”

“Things couldn’t be any better. This is the end of the month and I’m out of danger. There’s nothing to fear now. I can begin to sleep peacefully.”

“That’s true,” said March. “And where are you going tomorrow?”

The shepherd, certain that he had nothing to fear, told March the truth. “Tomorrow,” he said, “I shall go to the plains. The distance is shorter and the work less hard.”

“Fine. Farewell.”

March hastened to the home of his cousin April and told her the whole story. “I want you to lend me at least one day,” he said. “I am determined to catch this shepherd.” Gentle April was unwilling but March coaxed so hard that finally she consented.

The following morning the shepherd set off for the plains. No sooner had his flock scattered than there arose a storm that chilled his very heart. The sharp wind howled and growled, snow fell in thick, icy flakes, hail pelted down. It was all the shepherd could do to get his sheep back into the fold.

That evening as the shepherd huddled in a corner of his hearth, silent and melancholy, March paid him a visit.

“Good evening, Shepherd,” he said.

“Good evening, March.”

“How did it go today?”

“I’d rather not talk about it,” said the shepherd. “I can’t understand what happened. Not even in the middle of January have I ever seen a storm like the one on the plains today. It seemed as if all the devils had broken loose from hell. Today I had enough rough weather to last me the whole year. And oh, my poor sheep!”

Then at last was March satisfied.

And from that time on March has had thirty-one days because, as it is said in Tuscany, the rascal never returned to April the day he borrowed from her.