

Old Ben Bailey Meets His Match

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Big Les and Lester, his son, lived in No-End Hollow and raised foxhounds for a living. Their dogs were the finest hounds in all that part of Tennessee. People came from North Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama to buy foxhounds from them.

Now Lester had a pet hound that was not for sale to anybody. Funny Face was his name—Funny for short. Lester had been offered as high as fifty dollars for Funny, and that was a mighty big price at that time. But Lester loved Funny too much to sell him to anybody.

Funny followed Lester everywhere he went. That fall when school started, the teacher made a rule that said all dogs had to be left at home. It nearly broke Funny's heart to be left behind. Lester hated to leave him, but there was nothing else to do. As Lester was on his way to school one morning, he heard a familiar bark. Funny was racing after him. Lester felt so sorry for the dog that he hadn't the heart to scold him. He petted him for a minute or two. Then he said, "I'll have to take you home again even if it makes me late to school."

As they were going up the hollow, they had to pass right by Old Ben Bailey's place. He was standing by his front gate, and when he saw them, he understood what had happened.



"Too bad about your dog running away," he said. "Now you'll be late for school and you'll likely get a whipping for that. But I have a fine notion, Lester. Leave your dog here with me and pick him up on your way home this afternoon."

Lester thought for a minute. He knew Old Ben had a bad reputation. He was suspected of robbing corncribs and chicken roosts. Worst of all in the eyes of his neighbors, he was thought to be a dog thief.

Lester knew Old Ben's reputation. But he didn't think Funny would be in any danger. Old Ben wouldn't be likely to steal the dog right in broad daylight.

"Mighty much obliged to you for the favor," Lester said to Old Ben Bailey. With a final pat for Funny, he left him and hurried on to school. He was barely in time. As he dashed across the schoolyard, the last pupil was going inside.

Lester tried hard to study his lessons, but he kept thinking about leaving Funny with Old Ben. Something told him that he ought not to have done that. This thought was a constant worryment to him, so he missed three words in his spelling lesson. Mr. Rector kept him after school to learn them.

When he got out at last, he raced up the trail in such a hip-and-hurry that he stumped his toe. Lester was limping badly by the time he reached Old Ben's house.

Old Ben was leaning on the gate, but there was no sign of Funny.

"Where—where—," Lester stammered and stopped, all out of breath.

"Son, I have bad news for you," said Old Ben Bailey, speaking in a most mournful tone. "Your dog is gone away—gone for good. I hate to tell you, but this is how it happened. After you left Funny, he just crawled away into a corner of the yard and played dead like a possum. I tried to perk him up. I whistled to him; I talked to him; I gave him a hunk of bread. No use. He kept right on playing dead. And then, right down from out of the sky sailed a big turkey buzzard. It flew away with him clear over the mountaintop! Too bad, but that's what happened." And Old Ben shook his head sadly.

Now Lester did not believe a word of this wild story. He knew Old Ben had hidden Funny till he could get away with him. Then Old Ben would sell him far away from there. Lester knew Old Ben was putting on a sad face just to deceive him and that he was laughing on the other side of his mouth.

Just then a mule that was grazing in the yard threw back his head and brayed, "Heehaw!" Lester felt as if the mule were laughing with Old Ben. He swallowed a lump that rose in his throat. Then he swallowed again to keep from shouting out the notion that had popped into his head.

He limped around a step or two. He looked at his stumped toe.

"Mr. Ben Bailey," he said, "my foot hurts mighty bad. Would you let me ride your mule on home?"

"I reckon I could do you that favor," said Old Ben. "I'll need him early in the morning, but you can bring him back on your way to school."

Lester remembered that the next day was Saturday. But he didn't mention this on account of the plan that had popped into his head. He jumped on the mule in a hip-and-hurry. Then he remembered his manners.

"Mighty much obliged for the favor," he called as he headed up the trail toward home.

The next morning Big Les and Little Lester were digging sweet potatoes. About ten o'clock, along came Old Ben Bailey. He was as mad as a hornet.

"Where's my mule, Lester?" he yelled as soon as he got near them. "I told you to bring him back this morning, bright and early, on your way to school."



"But it's Saturday," Lester said. "I don't go to school on Saturday. I stay home and help dig potatoes."

"Never mind making excuses like that," Old Ben Bailey said. "Where is my mule? That's all I want to know, and I want to find out in a hurry!"

Old Ben Bailey's face was as red as a bowl of pickled beets. He shook a crooked finger right in Lester's face.

Lester leaned on his hoe handle, and he answered sadly, "Mr. Ben Bailey, I hate to tell you what happened to your mule. Why, as soon as I got home yesterday, I turned him out in the pasture. He grazed around awhile; then he stretched out to rest. That's when the turkey buzzards got him. A whole flock flew away with him."

Old Ben Bailey jumped up and down in rage. "That's a lie-tale you're telling!" he shouted. "No flock of turkey buzzards could fly away with a mule!"

Big Les stepped up then and laughed a laugh that rang up and down the hollow.

"The turkey buzzards around here are mighty strengthy," he said. "If one can carry off a full-grown foxhound, a whole flock wouldn't have any trouble flying off with a mule!"

He laughed again, and Lester laughed with him.

Old Ben Bailey turned all of a sudden and headed off down the trail. For once he felt outsmarted, and he couldn't think of another word to say.

While they were eating supper that night, Lester and his pappy heard a familiar bark outside the back door. When they let Funny in, as you may believe, there was a great hip-and-hurrah. No telling which was happier, the boy or his dog!

Old Ben Bailey's mule awoke him with a loud "Heehaw" next morning. He looked out his cabin door to see the mule grazing about the yard.

This might have been the end of the tale, but of course it wasn't. The news went up and down No-End Hollow and traveled over Near-Side and Far.

Folks everywhere bemeaned Old Ben Bailey for the trick he had played on the boy and his dog. And every time the tale was told, they bragged on Lester.

"He beat Old Ben at his own game," they said.

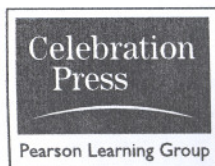
Old Ben met the tale wherever he went, going or coming. And it made him so ashamed that he moved to Far-Side.

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