

Making Good for Muley

by W. C. Tuttle

Author of "A Prevaricated Parade," "Loco or Love," etc.

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If there's a word of truth in that old saying about beauty being only skin deep, Susie Abernathy was the thinnest-skinned person I ever saw. I may not be a judge of womanly beauty, and the poetry of my soul may have been shook loose by pitching broncos, and buried deep under a coating of alkali dust, but I sure do sabe when a woman is hard to look at.

Seems to me like it's human nature for a feller with squirrel-teeth, no jaw to speak about and a physique like a corn cultivator to marry a beautiful female, and vice versa—not that “Muley” Bowles qualifies in the beauty division, but at that I reckon he shaded Susie a little.

Muley was a poetical puncher, of considerable avoirdupois, and he found Susie a thing of beauty and a joy forever. Susie was a niece of Zeb Abernathy, who owned a sheep outfit on Willow Creek, and a grouch toward all cowmen—and Muley punched cows for the Cross J outfit, and drew forty a month from old man Whittaker.

I'm not belittling Muley's salary, 'cause I drew the same, and so did “Telescope” Tolliver and “Chuck” Warner. Back in the dim and distant past, when cows first come into style, the old-timers got together and settled the pay of the average cow-hand.

They figured that any normal puncher—if there is such an animal—would try at least three turns of the roulette wheel, at ten dollars per turn. That left him ten dollars. He'd buy some tobacco, some red neckties and perfume, and what was left, at two-bits a

drink for hooch, would just carry him a few inches short of the murder and sudden death stage.

I've just been up to the house to draw my stipend from the old man, and am on my way back to the bunk-house, when Muley rides in. He's humped over in his saddle, like Misery going to a cemetery, and if you can stamp despair on a full-sized milk-cheese he had it on his face.

He slips his saddle off, turns his bronc into the corral, leans against the fence and cuts loose the granddaddy of all sighs. There ain't many men that you can hear sigh at pointblank range for a .30-30, but you could with Muley. It was like releasing the air on a freight train.

I wanders down there and passes the time of day with him, but he don't respond. He exhausts deep into his soul once more, and hangs up his saddle.

"Some of your relatives die, Muley?" I asks.

"Hello, Hen," says he, sad-like, "I ain't got no relatives—except one aunt. I don't know whether she's alive or not."

"Name of Bowles?"

"Nope. Name's Allender. Maw's name was Allender, and that's why I was named Lemule Allender, and—what do you want to know for?"

"You sighed a couple of times," I reminds him, and he nods and looks off across the range.

"Henry, how can I make some money? Regular money. I can't get along on forty a month—no more."

“You aim to marry Susie Abernathy?” I asks.

Muley digs a little trench with the toe of his boot, and shakes his head, sad-like—

“No-o-o, I reckon not, Hen.”

“Just come from there?” I asks.

“Uh-huh. Listen, Hen: can you keep a secret? I know danged well that you can’t, but I got to talk to somebody. Me and Susie’s got it all framed up to get married, but she argues that I got to see Zeb. Susie ain’t of age yet, and Zeb is her guardian, Sabe?

“Believe me, Henry, if I owned a penitentiary I’d hire Zeb. I’d a killed him a long time ago if it wasn’t for Susie, ’cause no sheep-man can tell me where to head in at—dang his old billy-goat face! He’s a darned——”

“Not to change the subject, Muley,” says I, “but why don’t you ask him?”

“I did. Do you think I’d feel this way over futures? You’re darn well right I asked him! Know what he said? He said to me, just like this: ‘Mister Bowles, you keep away from Miss Abernathy. She’s got her sights set higher than a forty-dollar puncher.’

“That’s what he said, Henry, and then I said: ‘Mister Abernathy, you’re tilting that gun for her: let her do her own shooting,’ and he said, ‘Your reputation ain’t none too good, and if the Vigilantes ever organize here Susie would be a widow.’ ‘You wouldn’t know it,’ says I, ‘’cause they’d get you first.’

“Muley,” says I, “which one of you shot first?”

“Neither one. I beat him on the draw, but you can’t kill your sweetheart’s guardian. It ain’t ethical, Hen. He told me that any old time I could show enough money to buy out his herd I could have Susie. I told him I wasn’t in the habit of buying either sheep or wives, and he said he knowed that without me telling him. Said that no forty-a-month puncher was ever that foolish.”

“How about Susie—does she love you, Muley?”

“Uh-huh,” he sighs, “she sure does. I don’t know how she can, but she does.”

“I don’t know either, Muley, but it takes all kinds of folks to make a world.”

“I been thinking of marriage for a long time,” he sighs, “I been afraid to ask her, but today she up and kissed me, and that settled it, Hen. Funny what a little kiss will do thataway. It makes me desperate.”

“It would have done the same to me, Muley. If a girl like her kissed me I’d likely turn outlaw. You aim to go to Chicago with that train of cows?”

“I can’t, Hen. I hope the old man don’t ask me to. You going?”

“No. Telescope and Chuck are going, but the old man wants me to act as foreman while they’re gone—he’s going, too. I’ll ask him to let you stay, if you want me to, Muley.”

“I’d love you like a brother, Hen,” he sighs, “I want to be near her.”

That’s Muley. Being of a poetical temperament he has to confide in folks. If me or Telescope or Chuck got kissed by a lady we’d

cherish the memory to our graves—unless it was Susie, and think of it only when alone.

I ain't so bad to look upon, and a lady couldn't be censured for giving me a kiss, but when it comes to Telescope and Chuck—well, I suppose they'll eventually marry beautiful women.

Telescope is built like a bed-slat, and orates openly that he's a twig of the Tolliver tree, which flourished and brought colored help in Kentucky before the plans were drawn for the pyramids. Chuck Warner don't claim nothing, and don't get sore if you subtract from his ancestry. He was born west of the Arizona line, and if he descended from anybody it was Ananias.

Chuck's legs are as short as his memory, and he was born with the face of a horse and the trusting eyes of an angel. He never told the truth but once. A big feller, from down below Mesquite, took him down and bumped his head on the ground.

“You got enough?” asks the big person, and Chuck howls—

“Plenty!”

“You ain't lying, are you?” asks the feller, after he lets Chuck up.

Chuck brushes off his clothes and shakes his sore head:

“No! Dang it all! I wasn't in no position to lie about it!”

Muley told me that I couldn't keep a secret, and I didn't. Me and Chuck and Telescope rides to town that afternoon, to foller out the usual program expected of punchers with a month's pay aboard, and I tells them about Muley's troubles.

“He’s more to be censured than pitied,” admits Chuck. “I don’t blame Zeb, but I do hate a shepherd what thinks a puncher ain’t good enough for his relatives.”

“Poor Muley,” says Telescope, sad-like, “any man what is just one aunt shy of being an orphan has my sympathy. I’ll promise you, Hen, that I’ll do all I can.”

“In Muley’s name I thanks you,” says I, “but if you can’t do it for Muley don’t do it on my account. I ain’t going to marry her. I just feel sorry for him. I’d feel sorry for anybody what was in love with Susie.”

“She ain’t exactly of the vampire type,” agrees Chuck. “Muley’s got one dead immortal cinch though: nobody’s going to come along and steal her away from him.”

“Zeb says he’ll have to marry her over his dead body or bring money enough to buy out his sheep,” says I.

“The latter is the more revolting,” says Telescope. “Tell Muley we’ll fix it for him after we get back if we have to steal Zeb’s sheep so he won’t have nothing to sell.”

The next few days we’re a busy crew, loading twenty cars of beef for Chicago, and we don’t have much time for conversation. Muley is too fat to herd ’em up the chute, so he sets down cross-legged on top of a car, and checks off the loads. Zeb Abernathy comes over to the yards and sets down on top of the fence, along with a lot of other loafers, and when Telescope sees him he crosses the corral and sets down beside Zeb.

“Howdy, Zeb,” says Telescope, rolling a smoke. “You going to leave here after you sells out, or are you going to make your home with Susie and her husband?”

“Hu-u-u-h?” grunts Zeb, amazed-like, “what’s that you said?”

“Haw, haw, haw!” laughed Telescope, slapping Zeb on the back. “You can’t keep things like that a secret around here, old-timer. What’ll we bring to the charivari—sheep-shears or tin cans?”

Zeb sets there, working his jaws faster and faster over his tobacco, and pretty soon he looks up at Muley. Muley grins at him, and nods. That’s the last straw.

“Muley’s going to buy out Zeb and marry his niece,” slates Telescope to Johnny Myers, owner of the Triangle brand. “Muley’s going to be a sheep-king, Johnny.”

All this time Zeb has been getting off the fence, and he’s so mad that he dances a jig in the dust when he hits the ground.

“Ya-a-a-ah!” he whoops, waving his long arms like a swarm of bees was after him. “Telescope Tolliver, you’re a liar if you think it! Marry that fat, forty-dollar fool! Buy my herd! Say, he ain’t never had money enough to buy a wool sock! Ya-a-a-ah! You think you’re funny, don’t you?”

“Ya-a-a-ah!” mimics Chuck, wiggling his ears. “Zebbie, you’re learning. Now the chorus—ba-a-a-a-ah!”

Zeb’s feelings can’t stand no more, so he turns around like a man with a sore throat, and goes back toward town stiff-legged like a bear with a peeve on.

“Zeb loves you fellers,” laughs Johnny. “I heard him say this morning that there’s just five things he hates. One is a rattlesnake and the other four draws a salary from Whittaker. What’s he sore at you fellers for? Has the sheep affected his brain?”

“Such a theory is absurd, Johnny,” says I. “It can’t be proved, ’cause nobody with brains ever mixes up with sheep. You can’t corrupt a coyote.”

A little later on me and Muley are setting on the fence, when Telescope climbs up beside us and talks to Muley like a father.

“You realize what this here marriage stuff means, Muley?” he asks. “You sure you ain’t just sick like a calf for it’s maw?”

“I know my own heart, liver and lights, Telescope,” replies Muley.

“Really love her with all your heart and soul, eh? Say, I’ll bet you’d turn her down cold if it was to your advantage.”

“You dang well know I wouldn’t!”

“Suppose,” says Telescope, “suppose somebody said to you: ‘Muley, I’ll give you a year’s salary if you’ll keep away from Susie?’ What would you do?”

“Me? I’d rise up on my hind legs and inform him that my love ain’t for sale. Sabe? Not for the salary of a lifetime.”

Telescope thinks it over for a while, and then shakes his head, sad-like:

“Maybe you would, Muley. I sure hopes you gets them sheep, ’cause you qualifies for the shepherd class without no fixing.

I've read about love making a fool out of a man, but—well, it ain't no funeral of mine.”

That night we shakes hands with Telescope and Chuck and the old man, and wishes them many happy returns of the day.

“Don't give up the ship, Muley,” advises Telescope. “Do a lot of thinking while we're gone, and if you can figure out any way of making money without robbing a bank, me and Chuck will put her over for you, eh, Chuck?”

“A stiff upper lip gathers no mustache,” proclaims Chuck, “and a faint heart never rustled no sheep, Muley. So-long, you pitch-fork puncher. And, Hen-ree, don't fall in love. One shepherd in the family is a plenty.”

Me and Muley rides back to the ranch, but Muley ain't got much to say. Love is a queer little animal, and affects folks different. Muley's was the dark-blue variety, with circles around the eyes.

The next morning after breakfast Muley gets a sheet of paper and a pencil, and seems to compose deep-like. After a while he cuts loose a deep sigh, and looks, dreamy-like, at the ceiling.

“I'm here,” says I. “Can I help you in any way, Muley?”

“I've got it,” he sighs. “You can't appreciate it, 'cause you ain't got no finer feelings, but I'll recite it to you:

“I loved a darling angel,
And she loved me quite a lot.
Her ears are like the clam shell,
And I can forget her not.
She's doomed to marry money,

And my heart will break, I think,
If I don't wed this angel,
I will drown myself in drink."

"Nice sentiment," I applauded. "Bobby Burns never had nothing on you except the long sound of his r's, but you'll have to put off your demise for at least another month. You can't do an artistic job of drowning in a couple of dollars' worth of hooch. If you was to get in over your depth in liquor, Muley, what brand would you prefer?"

Right then Muley gets sore at me. I finds that you can josh a man about love just so far, and then he turns like a worm and tries to bite me.

For the next few days he writes poetry in the evening, and is absent most all day. He ain't a pleasant critter to talk to, so I spends most of my time playing solitaire. One day down in Paradise I runs across Susie.

"Seen Muley lately?" I asks, and she shakes her head.

"No. Uncle Zeb ordered him off the ranch, and since then I've only seen him at a distance. He—he said he was going to try and convince uncle that he's something more than an ordinary cowboy. Do you think he can, Mister Peck?"

"Not unless uncle loses his sense of sight. Muley is pining away, day by day, and unless something comes up to relieve the situation he'll be able to go through a door without turning the knob. I know this is a leading question, Miss Abernathy, but would you marry that Lemuel Bowles if you had a good chance?"

“Why—er—uh-huh,” says she, nodding her head brave-like, while her ears get hot enough to light a cigaret on.

“I feel sorry for Muley,” says I, letting her take it any way she wants to, and then I lopes away, ’cause I sees Zeb coming.

The next morning we ain’t no more than out of bed when in rides old Paddy Morse. Paddy runs the post-office, along with his little store, and this is the first time I ever seen him at the Cross J.

“Is Le-mule Allender Bowles to home?” he inquires, peering over his specs at me.

“Right here, Paddy,” says Muley. “What do you want?”

“Letter for you. Reckon it’s for you, ’cause there ain’t no other Bowles around this here neck of the woods. You got to sign your full name, same as on that letter or I can’t let you have it. Sabe?”

“This here is a special delivery letter—darn such things! Uncle Sam forces me to ride plumb up here to deliver this or take the consequences, which I believe is three hundred days in jail or a year—sign right on that line. Now, I reckon I’ll go on back. Hope it ain’t bad news, Muley. Mostly always a letter of that kind or a telegram means death. Come from Milwaukee. You got any kin in Milwaukee?”

But Muley has gone back into the house, and Paddy don’t get the information he seeks.

About fifteen minutes later Muley comes down to the bunk-house, where I’m putting some rosettes on a new bridle, and he’s got a grin plumb across his fat face. I glances at him and goes on working.

“Henry,” says he, after a little while, “would you like to have a job herding my sheep?”

“Your sheep? Sure. I’ll herd all you got in my sleep.”

“I’m going to be the richest man in Yaller Rock County,” he proclaims.

“You better talk lower, Muley,” I advises. “If the county commissioners hear you talk thataway they’ll way-bill you to the loco-lodge at Warm Springs.”

“You remember me telling you about my Aunt Agnes, Hen? She died.”

“And left you a sheep?” I asks.

“Sheep—always sheep! Take a look at this.”

He hands me a letter—the one what Paddy brought him, and I looks her over. The brand opines it to be from Milwaukee, and the top of the letter proclaims that Frederick & Quincy are lawyers. She listens something like this:

DEAR SIR:

It grieves us to inform you that your aunt, Miss Agnes Allender, of this city, died on the fifth day of August, 1900.

According to her last will and testament, you, which she designates as her favorite nephew, will inherit the bulk of her estate, which is valued at about one hundred thousand dollars.

As you likely know she was a very eccentric person, and her will imposes you as follows: without receiving a cent of said inheritance you must, before the fifteenth day of August, 1900, have invested four-fifths of said hundred thousand dollars in sheep.

She also designates that: the said Lemuel Allender Bowles must not marry for the space of five years under penalty of forfeiture of entire inheritance. Also that he take a care for Alfred and Amelia for the rest of their natural lives. All of the foregoing requests must be complied with or my estate is to be divided between charitable institutions aforementioned in my will.

On the fifteenth day of August, 1900, our representative will call on you and examine your investments. We wish you luck.

I hands it back to him, and goes on working.

“Well,” says he, sort of choking-like, “don’t I get congratulated?”

“As soon as I gets time I’m going to feel sorry for you, Muley. How in thunder can you invest eighty thousand dollars around here, when everybody knows you ain’t got a cent, and everybody hates sheep. You can’t get married for five years, and you’ve got to feed, water and groom Alfred and Amelia all the rest of their natural lives. Wonder what them twin-sounding things are, Muley?”

Muley sets to thinking it over, and folding and unfolding that letter:

“Since you sympathized with me, things don’t look so rosy,” he admits, with a deep sigh. “Reckon I missed that marrying part. If Alfred and Amelia got a fair start they ought to be about due. Reckon I’ll ride down to Paradise—dang the luck! I’ve torn that letter plumb in two!”

He puts the two pieces in his vest pocket and goes off down to the corral.

The longer I thinks things over the harder it looks for Muley. Muley ain’t got the reputation of a saint around here, and can’t even lie so folks will believe him. Zeb owns all the visible supply of sheep, and Muley ain’t got no time to spare if he’s going to make good.

Along about noon Muley rides in. He’s got a big bundle under one arm and a big box under the other. He deposits his plunder on the steps, and sets down. I sets down beside him to wait until he gets through sighing, when all to once a squeaky voice yells:

“Way ’round ’em. Shep! Who’s crazy!”

I hops plumb off the steps, and whirls with my gun ready. Muley looks at me, sad-like, and sighs again—

“That’s Alfred, Henry.”

“Alfred?” I asks. “Alfred who?”

“I don’t know. Nobody introduced me, but it don’t matter—Alfred is a parrot.”

“Oh!” says I, “what’s Amelia—a lady bug?”

“Naw-w-w! Cat.”

“Scur-r-r-r-reek! Sheep dip! Sheep dip! Har, har, har! Scur-r-reek!” announces Alfred.

“Hen, what’s the natural life of a parrot?” asks Muley, without lifting his head.

“I don’t know. Why the question?”

“That letter specifies ‘natural lifetime.’ That’s the joker.”

“Did it say that?”

“Sure did. Wait, I’ll show you.” He fumbles around in his pockets for a while, and then looks foolish-like at me: “The front half of that letter is gone, Henry! Now, where in thunder did I drop that?”

He hunts some more but his pockets don’t essay a trace.

“Har, har, har! Way ’round ’em, Shep!” shrieks Alfred, and Muley kicks the cage off the porch.

“Shut up! You cross between a duck and a phonygraph! You ain’t yelped nothing but sheep-talk since I got you. No wonder Aunt Agnes died—she must have had ticks!”

“You ain’t showing proper respect for the dead, Muley,” I reminds him.

“Is that so!” he yelps. “Is that so! Well, dog-gone it, Hen, she didn’t show no respect for the living when she shipped me these trinkets, did she? Sending a puncher a sheep-talking buzzard ain’t showing a whole lot of respect. That cat is so old I’ll have to feed it on a bottle, and—”

“Sheep dip!” screams Alfred. “Who’s crazy?”

Muley throws his coat over the cage, and slams the whole works into the house. He follers it inside, and I sets there for a while thinking things over. The slats on Amelia's home ain't none too secure, so I loosens one end, and as I goes inside the bunk-house I sees Amelia trotting off toward the barn.

Muley comes down after a while and sets down on the bunk. "Alfred danged near bit my finger off, and Amelia's made her getaway, Hen," he announces in a sad voice. "Amelia was down there on the corral fence, making faces at Chuck's coyote pup, and she offers fight when I tries to calm her spirits. Aunt Agnes must have been a nut over ferocious animals."

"Nevertheless she was your mother's sister, and left you all her wealth," I chides him.

"Yah! Like throwing both ends of a rope to a drowning man, and forgetting to hang on to the middle. Can't marry for five—huh!"

He gets up and stomps out of the place, and I opines that Muley's inheritance is beginning to bear down upon his immortal soul.

The next day Hank Padden, who owns the Seven A outfit, shows up, and sets down with me in the parlor. Muley is washing up, and when Hank asks for him he yells that he'll be out in a minute.

"I'm going to make Muley an offer," says Hank to me, confident-like. "I hears that he's going to get married, and I needs a foreman what is a married man. Sabe? Single men ain't got nothing to hold 'em down. I like Muley—dang his fat carcass—and I rides over here to see him."

"Uh-huh," says I, 'cause there ain't nothing else to say, and then Hank yells at Muley:

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