

SHORT STORY AMERICA

OLD BALDY

JACK LONDON

“I DECLARE! so the deacon's goin' to try his hand on Old Baldy, eh?” Jim Wheeler chuckled gleefully at the news, and rubbed his hands. “Wall, mebbe somethin' 'll happen,” he went on, “an mebbe it won't, but I sha'n't be a mite s'prised if Old Baldy comes out a-top.”

“The deacon's got a right powerful will,” Sim Grimes suggested dubiously. “An' so has Baldy—powerful'st will in the country, bar none. But critters is critters and—” And Grimes was just preparing to unload his mind of certain ideas concerning man's primacy in the physical world, when the other cut him short.

“Now jest look here, Sim Grimes! Have you ever hearn tell of one man what limbered up Old Baldy when Old Baldy wa'n't so minded? There's Tucker an' Smith an' Johnson, an' Olsen, an' Ordway an' Wellman—didn't the whole caboodle try their luck at breakin' Old Baldy's sperrit, an' didn't the whole caboodle give it up? Jest tell me this, Sim Grimes—did you ever in yer born days hear on one man or passel of men gittin' Old Baldy on his feet when he took it into his head to lay down?”

“Mebbe yer right,” Sim Grimes assented mildly, then his old faith in Deacon Barnes returning, “But the deacon's got a right powerful will.”

“But Deacon Barnes jined a Prevention of Cruelty to Animals society, didn't he?” Grimes nodded. “An he don't b'lieve in whippin' dumb brutes?”

“Nope.”

“Then how in the land of Goshen kin he make Old Baldy git up when he ain't in the mood?”

“It's more'n I kin tell,” Grimes answered, at the same time starting up his horses. But before he was out of earshot he turned and called back, “But the deacon's got a powerful will!”

The farmers of Selbyville had little use for Old Baldy, and less regard; yet he was one of the finest oxen in the county, and perhaps the largest in the state. A good worker and a splendid yoke-animal, a stranger might have wondered at the celerity with which his various owners rid themselves of him, after having been inveigled into buying him. The same stranger might have worked him a week before he discovered why, and again an hour would have sufficed to unearth the secret. Old Baldy had but one fault—he was stubborn. And he manifested this stubbornness in but one way. Whenever things did not exactly go to suit him, he simply lay down in his tracks, there and then, consulting neither his own nor his master's convenience. And there he would stay. Nothing could move him. Force was useless; persuasion as bad. The heavens might roll up as a scroll, or the stars fall from their seats in the sky, but there Old Baldy would stay until of his own free will he decided to get up and move along. Never from the time yoke was first put upon him had a man succeeded in budging

him against his will. it was asserted that he had caused more gray hairs to grow in the heads of the Selbyville farmers than all the mortgages of the past three generations. He always went absurdly cheap, and man after man had bought him in the fond hope of conquering him, and winning not only the approbation of his fellows, but a very good bargain. And man after man sold him for little or nothing, insanely happy at being rid of so much vexation of spirit.

“As stubborn as Old Baldy” became a figure of speech, the common property of the community. Fathers conjured obedience from their sons by its use; the schoolmaster employed it on his stiff-necked pupils; and even the minister, calling sinners to repentance, blanched the cheek of the most unregenerate with its brand. But in the language Deacon Barnes alone, it had no place. It was his wont to smile and chuckle when others made use of the phrase, till people remarked it would be a blessing if he only got the tough old ox once in his hands. And now, after Old Baldy had become thoroughly set in the iniquity of his ways, the deacon had bought him off Joe Westfield for a song. Selbyville looked forward to the struggle with great interest, and sly grins and open skepticism were the order of the day whenever the topic was mentioned. They knew the deacon had a will of iron, but they also knew Old Baldy; and their collective opinion was that the deacon, like everybody else who had tried their hand at it, was bound to get the worst of the bargain.

Deacon Barnes and Old Baldy were coming down the last furrow of the ten-acre patch back of the pasture. Five rods more of the plow and it would be ready for the harrow. Old Baldy had been behaving splendidly and the deacon was jubilant. Besides, Bob, his promising eldest-born, had just run half way across the pasture and shouted that dinner was ready and waiting.

“Comin’!” he shouted back, no more dreaming that he would fail to reach the end of the furrow than that the dinner call was the trumps of judgment. Just then Old Baldy stopped. The deacon looked surprised. Baldy sighed contently. “Get up!” he shouted, and Baldy, with a hurt expression on his bovine countenance, proceeded to lie down.

Deacon Barnes stepped around where he could look into his face, and talked nicely to him, with persuasion and pathos mixed; for he feared greatly for Old Baldy's well being. Not that he intended whipping him brutally or anything like that, but—well, he was Deacon Barnes, with the ripened will of all the male Barnes that had gone before, and he hadn't the slightest intention of being beaten by a stubborn old ox. So they just looked each other in the eyes, he talking mildly and Baldy listening with complacent interest till Bob shouted a second time across the pasture that dinner was waiting.

“Look here, Baldy,” the deacon said, rising to his feet; “if you want to lay there so mighty bad, 'tain't in me to stop you. Only give you fair warnin'—the sweets of life do cloy, and you kin git too much of a good thing. Layin' down in the furrer ain't what it's cracked up to be, an' you'll git a-mighty sick on it before yer done with me.” Baldy gazed at him with stolid impudence, saying as plainly as though he spoke, “Well, what are you going to do about it?”

But the deacon never lost his temper. “I'm goin' to git a bite to eat,” he went on, turning away; “an' when I come back I'll give you one more chance. But mark my words, Baldy, it'll be yer last.”

At the table, Deacon Barnes, instead of being at all irritated, radiated even more geniality than was his wont, and this in the face of the fact that Mrs. Barnes had a mild attack of tantrums because he had kept dinner waiting. Afterwards, when he

went out on the porch, he saw Jim Wheeler had pulled up his horses where he could look over the fence at the victorious Baldy. When he passed the house he waved his hand and smiled knowingly at the deacon, and went on to spread the news that the deacon and Old Baldy were “at it.”

But there was a certain unusual exhilaration in the deacon's face and step as he led off to the barn with Bob following in his footsteps. There he proceeded to load up his eldest-born with numerous iron and wooden pegs and old pieces of chain and rope. Then, with his ax in hand, he headed across the pasture to the scene of mutiny. “Come! Git up, Baldy!” he commanded. “It's high time we got this furrer finished.”

Baldy regarded him passively, with half-veiled, lazy eyes. “Reckon it be more comfortable where you are, eh? B'lieve in takin' it easy, eh? All right. You can't say Deacon Barnes is a hard master.” As he talked, he worked, driving pegs all about the stubborn animal. Then from the pegs he stretched ropes and chains, passing them across Baldy till that worthy was hard and fast to mother earth—so hard and fast that it would have required a steam derrick to get him to his feet. “Jest enjoy yourself, Baldy,” the deacon called, as he started away. “I'll come up to-morrer after breakfast an' see how you be.”

True to his word, in the morning the deacon paid his promised visit. But Baldy was yet strong in his will, and he behaved sullenly as animals well know how. He even tried to let on that it was real nice lying out there with nothing to do, and that the deacon worried him with his chatter, and had better go away. But Deacon Barnes stayed a full quarter of an hour, talking pleasantly, with a cheery, whole-souled ring to his voice which vexed Baldy greatly.

In the evening, after supper, he made another visit, Old Baldy was feeling stiff and

sore from lying in one position all day with the hot sun beating down upon him. He even betrayed anxiety and interest when he heard his master's steps approaching, and there was a certain softening and appeal in his eyes. But the deacon made out he didn't see it, and after talking nicely for a few minutes went home again. In the morning Baldy received another visit. By this time he was not only sore, but hungry and thirsty as well. He was no longer indifferent to his owner's presence, and he begged so eloquently with his eyes that the deacon was touched, but he hardened his heart and went back to the house again. He had made up his mind to do what all Selbyville during a number of years had failed to accomplish, and now that he had started he was going to do it thoroughly.

When he came out again after dinner, Baldy was abject in his humility. His pleading eyes followed his master about unceasingly, and once, when the deacon turned as though to go away, he actually groaned. "Sweets do cloy, eh?" Deacon Barnes said, coming back. "Even lyin' in the furrer is vanity and vexation, eh? Well, I guess we'll finish this furrer now. What d'you say Baldy? And after that you kin have somethin' to eat an' a couple o' buckets of water. Eh? What d'you say?"

It can never be known for a fact as to whether Baldy understood his master's words or not, but he showed by his actions that he thoroughly understood when the ropes and chains were loosened and removed. "Kind o' cramped, eh?" the deacon remarked as he helped him to his feet. "Well, g'long now, le's finish this furrer."

Baldy finished that furrow, and after that there was never a furrow he commenced that he did not finish. And as for lying down—well, he manifested a new kind of stubbornness. He couldn't be persuaded or bullied into lying down. No sir, he wouldn't have it. he'd finish the furrow first, and all the furrows all day long. He grew real

stubborn when it came to lying down. But the deacon mind. And all Selbyville marveled, and a year afterward more than one farmer, including Jim Wheeler, was offering the deacon far more for Old Baldy than he had paid. But Deacon Barnes knew a bargain when he had got it, and he was just as stubborn in refusing to sell as Old Baldy was in refusing to lie down.