


Only A Mule

By Thomas J. Firth



Many long years ago, shortly after I had met Lecil Hadley and prior to the time I began the impossible task of attempting to figure him out, (a feat I have yet to accomplish) he showed up one day at the drunkhouse with all of his earthly belongings and moved in. We would spend the next eight months together as roommates. Among the things he brought with him was a load of mules. Lecil had sold one pack station and purchased another and these long ears were part of his pack string. It was my initiation to these curious creatures and because I didn't understand them and had all the preconceived notions most folks do concerning mules, they took some time to get used to. One mule in particular was Lecil's pride and joy; a very special mule named Mud. And it was from Mud that I would learn a lot, not just about mules, but about Lecil too, but more over, I would eventually discover something about myself.

Mud was a mousey brown buckskin built like a Navy destroyer. That is to say hard as nails and all business. Mud was always the boss wherever he seemed to find himself. In a mountain meadow, a desert canyon, or a corral, whether he was with other mules, horses, and even Queensland healers, it didn't matter. Mud was top dog and few ever challenged him. Those that did were promptly taught a lesson in etiquette and put in their proper place in the chain of command. If the fifteen-three-hand enforcer raised his head while grazing, every other animal in the area took immediate notice and either paused until Mud resumed grazing, or vacated the area should Mud decide he wanted that particular animal's spot.

Mud was fast as a Winchester and I once witnessed he and Lecil beat a motorcycle in a forty-yard race out behind Rudy's Bar one night. Lecil used that mule for everything. Leece roped off him, cut cattle with him, packed deer out on him, and led his pack string on old Mud. The two of them were closer than a pair of Tony Llamas and there was a special bond there. And if you ever wanted to see Lecil come uncorked and get humped up like a hog goin' to war, all you had to do was make a wise-crack about that mule.

You could cheap-shoot Lecil's social habits, comment on his personal hygiene, or even make jokes concerning his choice of women, but not that mule. Mud was off limits and heaven help the poor, unsuspecting joker who crossed the line and said an unkind word about Lecil's mule in his presence.

Mud was a one-person mule. Lecil talked to that mule like he would to anyone else and while I can't prove it, I'm fairly convinced that 'Ol Mud understood every conversation Lecil had with him.

When the end finally came for 'Ol Mud it was a difficult time for Leece. Mud lived to be thirty-four and Lecil used him right up until the end. Except for some wisps of gray and the tell-tale hollows above his eyes, Mud looked as fit the day he died as he did that first time I saw him step out of the back of the stock trailer.

I suppose as far as ends go, Mud's was a good one. One day he was his usual, ornery self, and the next he just laid down in a mountain meadow to sun himself while catching a few winks and he simply never woke up.

The morning Mud died, I was camped with Lecil. I had just hiked back to camp toting a stringer of rainbows for breakfast and noticed out of the corner of my eye Leece kneeling over something out in the meadow while a feed bag full of grain draped over his shoulder. He was kneeling over Mud.

Except for myself, I had never witnessed a grown man cry, and as I approached I knew what had happened. I stood there behind Lecil and listened to him sob as he spoke gently to his lifeless friend.

"I'm sorry, Lecil. I'm really sorry. It'll be alright, it's only a mule," I said, trying to comfort him in some small way.

"Kid, Ah'll be danged if'n you don't have a three-storied education in a single-storied brain," said Lecil, shaking his head in amazement, looking up at me with tears streaming down his face. "Sometimes Ah think you roll them words around in the empty head of yourn and spit 'em out jest ta see whut's gonna land where." At that moment I began to think he was right. What a foolish thing for me to say, I thought to myself.

Lecil was better than most at trying not to take life so seriously and I must say that to this day I have never seen anyone follow that philosophy of life better than he. This, however, wasn't one of those times. Lecil looked at me as serious as a heart attack and to this day, these many long years later, I have never forgotten his words.

"Kid, some of the best times I've ever spent on God's green earth have been far in the backcountry with *only a mule*. Often times, when nuthin' seemed to be goin' right, Ah've been able to go somewhere's and get it all figured out jes sittin' on the back of *only a mule*. Some of the lowest moments Ah've ever spent in this life and tryin' to make sense of it all has been spent with *only a mule* to comfort me and help me through it. And some of the saddest times Ah've ever spent, like right now, have been over *only a mule*."

"So when ya says it's *only a mule*, well, that's like sayin' it's only a New Mexico sunset. It's like sleepin' out under the stars and sayin' it's only a Montana sky. Ah guess ya jes don't understand the miles Ah've traveled, the time Ah've spent, the friendship Ah've shared with *only a mule*, and Ah guess Ah should accept that. But Ah don't."

"The truth is, kid, Ah feel sorry for ya, 'cause if'n ya thinks it's *only a mule* then ya probably also understand phrases like it's only a friend, it's only a mother, and it's only a promise. Ya no doubt cain't fer the life of ya sees that *only a mule* here is whut brings out the purest meanin' of friendship, trust, and happiness to a feller like me. The special bray Ah gets ta let me know he's glad ta see me, and the gentle touch and warm breath, calm as a mother's lullaby, on the side of my face from a soft muzzle ta let me know he understands, Ah'm gonna miss them things terribly. Some of my proudest moments have been spent with *only a mule*."

"Whut Ah'm tryin' ta say, kid, and Ah don't reckon you'll understand, is that it's *only a mule* whut gives me purpose and brings out whut's best in me, kid. And it's *only a mule* whut keeps me from being only a man."

"Now, if'n ya don't mind, Ah'd kinda like ta be alone fer a while, Ah needs ta talk ta someone and get some things fig-

ured out."

While to this day I have never completely figured Lecil Hadley out, I believe I do understand what makes him tick, and being in the company of mules myself now for these many years, and thanks to Lecil, I have come to understand what the old muleskinner meant that day in the meadow. I have never again since said, or even thought, "It's only a mule."