

## THE CATTLE TRAIN

by

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Joe and his father had just sat down for the evening meal when the Vaquero Calderón came with the news. The Vaquero was still in his denims and chaps from working the horses and he smelled of alfalfa and woodsmoke. The heels of his boots clacked on the flagstone flooring as he crossed the long room. In the dim light from the oil lantern, Joe could see the line of grit across the Mexican cattleman's forehead from where he had removed his hat upon entering the house. The Vaquero leaned in close and whispered the news to Joe's father. He spoke that way for a long time and Joe knew that it must be something very important for the Vaquero did not like to enter the main ranch house.

The house cook wrapped their supper in wax paper and tied it in a canvas bag. Joe's father took a Winchester down from the gun rack and sighted it off at a spot on the far wall. He tucked the gun under his arm and stuffed a box of shells into his jacket pocket. Joe sat obediently

in his chair at the table breathlessly watching his father, afraid to ask what the news was. His father took up his gear and then stood studying the boy. “All right, Joe,” he said at last. “You can come along.” The boy smiled and bolted headlong from his chair, running to get his gear.

The two of them left the main house and walked the short trail past the hay barn and tack room. The Hurlburt brothers, Parker and Trainer Hurlburt, they were already at the stable house when Joe and his father got there. The Vaquero Calderón came out leading two quarter horses, the reins thrown over their heads. He took them out into the gray dusk and tied them up to the sheep dip beside two others and the horses stood blowing great clouds of blue smoke from their nostrils into the cold still air. Parker Hurlburt shook out a bed roll and then set a Winchester rifle onto the roll and bundled it up and then synched it down with the saddle strap and now only the Vaquero Calderón was without a gun.

Trainer Hurlburt looked up from where he sat on the running board of the Model T truck wiping down a shotgun with an oiled rag. “It’s for Joe,” he said, breaking the stock on the big gun and looking down through the barrel. “He can use it to keep the wolves off these horses.”

Joe went over to the where the horses were standing and wedged himself between them where it was warm. He pushed his hand down into his coat and felt the steam coming from the biscuits he had put inside his pocket.

Joe’s father came and looked over the horses. “How come you didn’t saddle up that old bay horse for Joe?” he asked the Vaquero.

“He’s better off with one of these quarter horses,” the Vaquero said, shortening a stirrup strap. “One that won’t spook at the smell of blood.”

Joe looked up at his father. “Where are we going?”

“Down to the Seguro Wash, Joe. I’m afraid a cattle train has come off the tracks and gone down into the wash.”

They went up the old Mormon road and across a high mesa of sage and juniper with Parker Hurlburt in the lead and Joe’s father next followed by Joe just behind and Trainer Hurlburt at the last. The sun quit the sky quietly and without color and soon a big half-moon came up, the one side clear and bright like molded paraffin, the other black and unknowable. Joe watched the hindquarters of the horses sway their riders as they went up the low rise. The wind came down out of the Wasatch Range in long cold gusts and Joe pulled up the sheepskin collar of his quilted corduroy and listened to the flat clapping of the hooves on the stones.

They went along like that in an ordered line with the horses going only where the trail told them, but the Vaquero Calderón rode his horse out into the fields and walked it alone out there away from the others. Joe’s father looked out at the Vaquero moving easily through the range grass. “I wish he’d stay on the trail with the rest of us,” he said.

All the way down the escarpment they could see the engine and wooden cattle cars burning in the wash below. They began to pick up the smell of burning creosote and cooked meat and they could see the outline of cattle lying about the wreckage.

The Vaquero reined in his horse and rode it up alongside Joe’s. “Do you see them, Joseph?” the Vaquero said to the boy. “Do you see what has happened to them down there? I tell you that machine and animal are not meant to be together like this. Cattle was meant to be moved on the hoof by men and by horses and not by a machine.”

The Vaquero said he had heard there was a machine now that could be used to drive a bolt into the skulls of cattle and swine. “It is not natural,” he said, “to kill an animal with a machine.”

Joe thought about it. He had seen the Vaquero use a Winchester to cut down a range rabbit for his dinner. "But, a gun is a machine," he said to the Vaquero.

The Vaquero said, yes, but that he himself would never use a gun to kill an animal that had been raised by men.

"What does it matter how you kill them?" Joe wanted to know. "They're still dead in the end."

The Vaquero said that it mattered not for the animal, but for the man. "Once a machine can do the killing, there will be no end to it," he said. Joe could see the reflection of the fire dancing in the Vaquero's black eyes. "Where will it stop when a man no longer has to draw the blood himself?"

The four cattlemen and the boy went on and just before they reached the basin floor they came upon a group of Indians headed down the trail. There were two men and a woman and a boy about Joe's age. Their feet were wrapped in hide and cloth and they had twisted rags to cover their legs. One wore a torn frock coat and the woman was wrapped only in a military blanket. The Vaquero pulled up and spoke to the Indians and then he went on. Joe's father reached into his saddle bag and took out a tied bundle and handed it down to the Indian woman.

"Was that our supper?" Joe asked when they had passed the Indians.

"Yes, Joe," his father said.

"But, I was hungry."

"I know, Joseph. I was hungry, too. But I think those Indians could use that food more than we could, don't you?"

Joe looked back along the trail. "Yes, sir," he said. "I guess they could."

On the basin floor they rode alongside thirty or more cattle cars resting unharmed on the tracks. The cars were painted brick red with 'D. D. Pennebaker Meat Company' whitewashed on the sides. Joe could see the dark eyes of beasts staring out between the wood slats. Ahead, the wash opened up like a gash in the earth glowing orange and yellow from the dwindling flames. The wooden rail bridge sagged where it had been weakened by the flash flood and then it vanished altogether along with the front end of the train leaving the remainder of its cars sitting motionless on the tracks like a decapitated snake. They began to hear the wailing of cattle. The Vaquero rode his horse up a low bajada and sat the horse looking down into the wash below. "My god," he said. "My god."

The cars had jackknifed into the wash and lay buckled at awkward angles. Some had pinwheeled and were facing the opposite direction from which they had been traveling. They had broken open like the hulls of ships run aground and the cattle had spilled out into the wash and lay near the cars, their limbs buckled beneath them or their hides rent open from having been thrown against jagged iron and wood. Two of the cars had burned down to their wheel casings and were littered with the cracked and steaming husks of cattle. The engine had plowed a deep rut into the earth and lay on its side groaning from the heat of the fire and blowing steam out with great huffing noises like the breath of a dying man. Fluids bled from the side and made dark stains in the earth.

Joe's father led his three cattlemen and his son into the wash. He chose a spot where the walls had recently caved and he leaned far back in the saddle and the horse lurched downward, its hooves biting deeply into the loose earth. At the bottom of the wash they came to a rail car that had gone into the earth like a javelin and stood almost on end leaning up against the rail bridge. The giant animals inside had fallen to the downward end of the car and lay heaped upon

each other. Through the slats, Joe could see them, their eyes bulging and teeth bared, distorted by the weight pressing down upon them. The pile heaved and jerked and flexed as if it were a single being, a scene from the Final Judgment. From inside the car came the throaty bellows of animals having the air forced from their lungs.

“Can’t you help them, dad?” Joe cried.

“I’m afraid not, Joe,” his father said. “The whole thing would come down on us.”

Parker Hurlburt took the Winchester and a box of shells and went back up onto the rail bridge and stood firing down into the animals until finally the wailing dwindled except for those buried in the center of the heap.

Joe’s father sent Trainer Hurlburt to look into the engineer’s compartment. He scrambled over the engine like a skinner across the belly of a landed whale. He looked down inside the engineer’s compartment and then he reeled back. “It’s the engineer,” he called down to Joe’s father. He slid down the engine frame and dropped to the ground. “I wish to god I hadn’t a seen that,” he said.

They found the brakeman where he had been dragged from the engine and lay dead with his hands crossed over his chest. Joe’s father pointed to a pair of tracks leading away from the dead brakeman to the north wall of the wash. “Somebody walked out of here,” he said.

It was Parker Hurlburt who took down the first steer. He had seen it grazing just away from the engine and thought it unharmed, but when it turned he could see its left side was nothing more than a gaping wound of deeply cleaved meat torn shoulder to flank. “No sense leaving them when they’re like that,” Joe’s father decided, and so Parker Hurlburt leveled the Winchester and brought the steer down with a single shot.

And they kept coming upon them like that, cattle lying on their sides where they had wandered off with splintered limbs or standing with their heads dropped down and their scalps peeled back off their skulls, dazed and staggering with organs exposed or blood draining from their ears and nostrils. When they came upon one crippled or roasted or torn open, they'd stand back with the rifle and put the bullet in behind the ear. Joe had seen steer slaughtered on the ranch, but this was another thing altogether. He turned his head from it so he would not have to see it. He wished then that he had not come with his father.

The Vaquero did not use a gun. He found two big steer covered in oil and half cooked from the fire. They sat breathing heavily through their mouths and staring back stupidly at their own charred flanks. The Vaquero took out his big knife and he cut the jugular veins in their throats. He found another steer kneeling in the sand on broken forelegs and he cut its throat, too. There were others, too, and once when he cut the vein the blood rushed out and covered him so now as he walked about the wash his clothes were heavy and stained dark with the blood of animals.

They were more than two hours in the wash killing cattle like that. Finally, they came upon an old bull grazing among the range grass and seemingly unaware of its own entrails dragging in the dirt about its feet. When he saw it, the Vaquero Calderón said, "That's enough, god damn it. We don't need to see any more of this," and then he took the knife and drew it through the vein in the neck and the bull dropped his head and watched the blood drain from his own throat into the sand and then his head began to swing from side to side until finally his legs gave out and he fell into the dark stain pooled beneath him in the sand.

It was just after the old bull went down that Joe saw the Indians again. They came out of the dark and stood near the horses staring down into the wash.

“Dad,” Joe called, but it was the Vaquero Calderón who looked up and saw them first.

The Vaquero came up out of the wash and spoke to the Indians. “They want to take some of this meat,” the Vaquero said. He went down into the wash with the Indians. The two Indian men began to strip the hide from a steer. Parker and Trainer Hurlburt crouched down in the wash and rolled cigarettes on their knees and Joe’s father watched leaning against one of the broken cattle cars. The Vaquero pulled back the head of the steer and one of the Indian men cut across the neck and down the belly with a long knife.

They had been working on the first steer for a short time when they heard the voice from behind them.

“Don’t do that.”

The voice came from where the engine lay on its side. A slight-shouldered man with round spectacles came across the sand with small, quick steps. He dabbed at the blood on his forehead with a handkerchief.

“You get those Indians away from our meat,” the man said. “That meat is the property of the D. D. Pennebaker Meat Company.” The collar of his white shirt was stained with blood and his name was stitched on the breast of his black vest. Winterly. He was a very small man.

Parker Hurlburt stood and pointed at the man with his cigarette. “Where the hell did he come from?”

The small man squinted through his spectacles. “I don’t know. I got hit on the head,” he said, dabbing at the blood on his forehead again. “You get them away from this meat,” he said to Joe’s father.

“Who are you, mister?” Joe’s father said.

“Winterly. Rail agent for the D. D. Pennebaker Meat Company.”



“This meat is no good to you,” said Joe’s father. “It’s just going to rot out here.”

“I’d rather it rot out here than give it to those Indians,” said the rail agent.

The Vaquero straightened up to face the man. He straddled the head of the steer, the knife held low at his side and his clothes black with blood. The rail clerk stepped back. The Indians went on stripping the hide.

“I’m asking you to reconsider,” said Joe’s father. “These people are hungry. They could use the meat.”

“I can’t do that,” the rail clerk said, without hesitation. “I have been entrusted to deliver this meat from Salt Lake to San Francisco no matter what condition. It is on my authority.”

“Your authority is no good out here, mister,” the Vaquero said. He knelt back over the steer with his blade.

Joe was standing nearby. He felt proud to see his father and the Vaquero stand up against the railroad man like that. The men at the ranch were always telling stories about how greedy the railroads were. The Indians were hungry and needed the meat and Joe thought it was right that they should have it.

The Vaquero put the heel of his boot into the flank of the dead steer and peeled the hide back off the carcass. The Vaquero was lifting the head again when Joe heard his father say, “Now hold on, Juan. You’re going to have to get off that steer until this man says it’s okay.”

Joe was surprised. He didn’t understand why his father would take sides against the Vaquero.

“That man can go to hell,” the Vaquero said, without looking up.

The rail clerk was silent.

“But it’s not your property,” said Joe’s father.

The Vaquero stood up and looked at Joe's father. "And whose property is it?"

"It belongs to this man here."

The Vaquero let the horn of the steer slip from his hand and the head fell back onto the dirt. "Tell me," the Vaquero said. "If a ship at sea runs aground, does not the cargo then become the property of those who find it washed up on the beach?"

Joe's father paused and cocked his head. "We are not on the open sea, Juan. We're part of a society here and a society has rules."

The Vaquero turned a full circle gesturing out at the empty landscape on all sides. "Where is this society?" he said. "Who is there to make us obey these rules?"

"I don't like it any more than you do, but that's the rule. It's not our property." Joe's father shifted the rifle in his hands. "So I'm telling you now, get away from that steer."

The Vaquero smiled wide and slow and then he stepped over the carcass and sheathed his blade. "I see," said the Vaquero. "This society business has worked out very well for the railroads and you rancheros, hasn't it?"

The Vaquero went up the wash toward the horses. Joe watched him go.

They passed the Indians on the trail going away from the wash. The Indians stepped off the trail and lowered their heads as the men passed on their horses. Joe remembered the biscuits in his coat pocket and he slowed his horse and handed the biscuits down to the Indian boy. The boy took the biscuits.

"Those Indians were almost starved, weren't they?" Joe asked his father when they had passed.

"Yes, they were, Joe."

"I guess I'm pretty hungry, too," Joe said.

“It was nice thing of you to give them your biscuits so they could have something to eat.”

They rode. Joe thought about it some more. “How come the man wouldn’t let the Indians have the meat, dad?”

“Because it was the company’s meat.”

“But couldn’t he have given it to them if he wanted?”

“I suppose not. He had orders not to.”

“But couldn’t he have done it anyway, if he thought it was right?”

Joe's father pulled his horse around so it stood blocking the trail. “Of course not, Joe. No man has the right to take one man’s property and give it to another man.”

They were quiet for a very long time. After a while Joe looked back along the line of riders. “Where did the Vaquero go?” he asked.

“I suppose he has gone south,” his father said. “He never really did get used to how cold it is up here.”

Joe looked over the landscape to where the stars and sky folded into the horizon and then he put his head down against the cold and followed the trail. The sky had gone an inky blue to the east and they stayed to the trail. As they crossed the mesa again Joe climbed onto the horse behind his father where it was warm and he wrapped his arms around his father and slept like that all the way back to the stable house.