

THROW THE DEVIL OFF THE TRAIN

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CHAPTER ONE

"Is he dead?" The high-pitched voice whined.

"If he isn't" came a low rumble, "I could fix that."

"I ain't killin' no man over a saddle."

"And a gun. He's got one of them new Colt revolvers."

"I still ain't killin' no man over a saddle and a gun."

"I bet he has a bag of gold on him." The lower voice had the power of a salesman on a slow day. "He's as dirty as a prospector."

"He ain't as dirty as us."

"Suppose he does have gold. Would it be alright to kill him then?"

The high-pitched bleat continued. "How much gold you reckon he has?"

"At least a couple twenty-dollar gold coins."

"Maybe you're right. For forty dollars, why cain't I just hit him over the head with this fence post?"

"If you don't knock him clean out, I'll have to shoot him."

"You got a gun?"

"I'll use his."

"Okay, but you do the shootin'. I ain't shot nobody since the war."

"Maybe he is dead. Shorty said he'd been laying there on his saddle without movin' since daybreak."

The whiner seemed hesitant. "If he's such easy pickin's, why didn't Shorty clean him out?"

"Maybe he did."

"In the middle of the day? Who sleeps in the train yard in the middle of the day?"

"Old man Ticcado did. He was sound asleep right smack dab on the tracks."

"He was crazy."

"You have to be crazy to marry one woman when you was still married to another."

"Well, it didn't work out too bad."

"What? He got run over by a train."

"Yeah, but they sent half to one wife and half to the other."

"I say it's goin' to be simple. I'll reach for the revolver. If he raises up, you clobber him with the fence post."

"You got any whiskey? I could bust a skull better if I had me some whiskey."

"We'll have plenty of whiskey when we pick him clean. You ready?"

"I reckon."

"I'll just reach down here nice. . .and. . .slow," the low voice whispered, ". . .and. . .stop!" The last word was a shout.

"Stop? He ain't raised up."

"Don't hit him."

"Is he dead?"

"I don't think so. He's got one eye open and a saddle pistol shoved in my belly."

Race Hillyard opened his other eye. An unshaved man with matted hair and a tattered brown suit hovered over him. "Tell your pal to put down the post," Hillyard growled.

"Put down the post, Cuke. You heard him."

The little man with a big, black mustache jumped back, but held onto the broken piece of four-by-four.

Hillyard shoved the first man so hard, he tumbled to the dry dirt of the train yard. "Is there any reason why I shouldn't shoot you two? You were going to kill me."

The one called Cuke dropped the post. His bare toes wiggled through the holes in his boots. "Me and Willie thought maybe you was dead."

Hillyard backed up, but kept his gun pointed at the men. "It's alright to steal from a dead man?"

Willie struggled to his feet. "They don't complain much."

Cuke wiped his broad nose on the back of his tattered shirt sleeve. "Don't shoot us, mister. Times is tough. They run us out of our homes after the war and won't give us decent jobs out here."

"You two Rebs?" Hillyard asked.

Cuke threw his shoulders back. "We didn't rebel against nothin'. We are proud veterans of the Army of Northern Virginia."

Hillyard shoved his saddle gun back into his bedroll. "That's what I wanted to hear." He reached in his coat pocket and tossed the man a coin.

Cuke turned it over in his hand. "A silver dollar?"

"That's to buy dinner for both of you. I was on the losin' side of the war, too, boys."

"No foolin'?" Cuke scratched his head like a dog looking for a flea. "We didn't know that."

Hillyard's glance whipped around the train yard, as if he expected another ambush. "Would it have made a difference?"

Willie eased close enough to smell the garlic and whiskey on his breath. "To be honest, mister, probably not." He leaned against Race's shoulder. "These is tough times, alright. A man's got to do what's right for himself."

Hillyard felt his Colt being pulled slowly from his holster. His clenched right hand caught Willie under his narrow, pointed chin and lifted him off his feet. The gun blasted into the air, as the man slammed motionless to the dirt.

The Colt retrieved, he turned towards Cuke, who stumbled backwards through a cloud of black powder smoke.

"Get out of here," Hillyard roared.

"Eh. . .yes sir. . .I, eh, didn't know Willie was goin' for your gun. I reckon you want your dollar back."

"No, keep it and get out of here."

"Thank you, sir. Us southerners need to take care of each other."

"I'm not doing it for you. Nor the South. I figure it's my Christian duty."

"Well, praise the Lord, brother." Cuke stopped in his retreat. "Say, if I had me a twenty-dollar loan, I could go west and start all over. Could you spare. . .?"

Hillyard cocked the hammer of his revolver and aimed it at the man's head.

The man pushed up his hands. "No offense. I'm goin'." He paused. "I reckon you're a Baptist."