

Ron Hansen

The Assassination
of Jesse James by the
Coward Robert Ford

a novel



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To John Irving, John L'Heureux, John Gardner

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Part One

LOOT

SEPTEMBER 7th, 1881

His manner was pleasant, though noticeably quiet and reserved. He listened attentively to every word that Scott Moore or I uttered but he himself said little. Occasionally he would ask some question about the country and the opportunities for stock-raising. But all the time I was conscious that he was alertly aware of everything that was said and done in the room. He never made the slightest reference to himself, nor did he show the least trace of self-importance or braggadocio. Had I not known who he was I should have taken him for an ordinary businessman receiving a social visit from two of his friends. But his demeanor was so pleasant and gentlemanly withal that I found myself on the whole liking him immensely.

MIGUEL ANTONIO OTHRO

My Life on the Frontier

HE WAS GROWING INTO middle age and was living then in a bungalow on Woodland Avenue. Green weeds split the porch steps, a wasp nest clung to an attic gable, a rope swing looped down from a dying elm tree and the ground below it was scuffed soft as flour. Jesse installed himself in a rocking chair and smoked a cigar down in the evening as his wife wiped her pink hands on a cotton apron and reported happily on their two children. Whenever he walked about the house, he carried several newspapers—the Sedalia *Daily Democrat*, the St. Joseph *Gazette*, and the Kansas City *Times*—with a foot-long .44 caliber pistol tucked into a fold. He stuffed flat pencils into his pockets. He played by flipping peanuts to squirrels. He braided yellow dandelions into his wife's yellow hair. He practiced out-of-the-body travel, precognition, sorcery. He sucked raw egg yolks out of their shells and ate grapes when sick, like a dog. He would flop open the limp Holy Bible that had belonged to his father, the late Reverend Robert S. James, and would contemplate whichever verses he chanced upon, getting privileged messages from each. The pages were scribbled over with penciled comments and interpretations; the cover was cool to his cheek as a shovel. He scoured for nightcrawlers after early morning battering rains and flipped them into manure pails until he could chop them into writhing sections and sprinkle them over his garden patch. He recorded sales and trends at the stock exchange but squandered much of his capital on madcap speculation. He conjectured about foreign relations and justified himself with indignant letters, derided Eastern financiers, seeded tobacco shops and saloons with preposterous gossip about the kitchens of Persia, the Queen of England, the marriage rites of the Latter Day Saints. He was a faulty judge of character, a prevaricator, a child at heart. He went everywhere unrecognized and lunched with Kansas City shopkeepers and merchants, calling himself a cattleman or commodities investor, someone rich and leisured who had the common touch.

He was born Jesse Woodson James on September 5th, 1847, and was named after his mother's brother, a man who committed suicide. He stood five feet eight inches tall, weighed one hundred fifty-five pounds, and was vain about his physique. Each afternoon he exercised with weighted yellow pine in his barn, his back bare, his suspenders down, two holsters crossed and slung low. He bent horseshoes, he lifted a surrey twenty times from a squat, he chopped wood until it pulverized, he drank vegetable juices and potions. He scraped his sweat off with a butter knife, he dunked his head, in the morning, in a horse water bucket, he waded barefoot through the lank backyard grass with his six-year-old son hunched on his shoulders and with his trousers rolled up to his knees, snagging garters.

snakes with his toes and gently letting them go.

~~He smoked, but did not inhale, cigars; he rarely drank anything stronger than beer. He never philandered nor strayed from his wife nor had second thoughts about his marriage. He never swore in the presence of ladies nor raised his voice with children. His hair was fine and chestnut brown and recurrently barbered but it had receded so badly since his twenties that he feared eventual baldness and therefore rubbed his temples with onions and myrtleberry oil in order to stimulate growth. He scissored his two-inch sun-lightened beard according to a fashion then associated with physicians. His eyes were blue except for iris pyramids of green, as on the back of a dollar bill, and his eyebrows shaded them so deeply he scarcely ever squinted or shied his eyes from a glare. His nose was unlike his mother's or brother's, not long and preponderant, no proboscis, but upturned a little and putted, puckish, low-born nose, the ruin, he thought, of his otherwise gallantly handsome countenance.~~

Four of his molars were crowned with gold and they gleamed, sometimes, when he smiled. He had two incompletely healed bullet holes in his chest and another in his thigh. He was missing the nail of his left middle finger and was cautious lest that mutilation be seen. He'd had a boil excised from his groin and it left a white star of skin. A getaway horse had jerked from him and fractured his ankle in the saddle stirrup so that his foot mended a little crooked and registered barometric changes. He also had a condition that was referred to as granulated eyelids and it caused him to blink more than usual, as if he found creation slightly more than he could accept.

He was a Democrat. He was left-handed. He had a high, thin, sinew of a voice, a contralto that could twang annoyingly like a catgut guitar whenever he was excited. He owned five suits, which were rare then, and colorful, brocaded vests and cravats. He wore a thirty-two-inch belt and a fourteen-and-a-half-inch collar. He favored red wool socks. He rubbed his teeth with his finger after meals. He was persistently vexed by insomnia and therefore experimented with a vast number of soporifics which did little besides increasing his fascination with pharmacological remedies.

He could neither multiply nor divide without error and much of his science was superstition. He could list the many begotten of Abraham and the sixty-six books of the King James Bible; he could recite psalms and poems in a stentorian voice with suitable histrionics; he could sing religious hymns so convincingly that he worked for a month as a choirmaster; he was marvelously informed about current events. And yet he thought incense was made from the bones of saints, that leather continued to grow if not dyed, that if he concentrated hard enough his body's electrical currents could stun lake frogs as he bathed.

He could intimidate like King Henry the Eighth; he could be reckless or serene, rational or lunatic, from one minute to the next. If he made an entrance, heads turned in his direction; if he strode down an aisle store clerks backed away; if he neared animals they retreated. Rooms seemed hotter when he was in them, rains fell straighter, clocks slowed, sounds were amplified: his enemies would not have been much surprised if he produced horned owls from beer bottles or made candles out of his fingers.

He considered himself a Southern loyalist and guerrilla in a Civil War that never ended. He regretted neither his robberies nor the seventeen murders that he laid claim to, but he would brood about his slanders and slights, his callow need for attention, his overweening vaingloriousness, and he was excessively genteel and polite in order to disguise what he thought was vulgar, primitive, and depraved in his origins.

Sicknesses made him smell blood each morning, he visited rooms at night, he sometimes heard children in the fruit cellar, he waded into prairie wheat and stared at the horizon.

He had seen another summer under in Kansas City, Missouri, and on September 5th, in the year 1881, he was thirty-four years old.

HE HAD INVITED Alexander Franklin James over from their mother's farm in Kearney for the occasion and ~~dined on jackrabbit, boiled potatoes and onions, and hickorynut cake, then everyone, excepting~~ Frank, autographed the night air with magnesium sparklers that were a gift from Jesse Edwards James, a six-year-old who thought his name was Tim. Frank presented his younger brother with a pair of pin coral cufflinks, and the two played cribbage as Zee tucked in the children, and after she retired for the evening, they rode a mule-powered streetcar downtown, Frank cleaning his nails on one side of the aisle as on the other Jesse slumped down in a frock coat and talked compulsively about stopping the Chicago and Alton Railroad at Blue Cut.

On the following morning, Frank rode east and Jesse frittered that Tuesday and part of the next day through. He picked coffee beans from a canning jar and ground them fine as coal dust. He soaped his saddle and tack and glossed the rings and curb with pork lard; he carried water and cord wood; he tied onto his saddle horn a burlap sack that bore the red trademark of grain merchandisers in St. Louis. His two-year-old daughter swept his light brown beard with a doll brush, he dressed in a white linen shirt and gray wool Sunday clothes, tied a blue bandana around his neck, and climbed into a soiled Confederate officer's coat that was rich with the odors of manual labor and was heavy enough to snag the pegs off a closet rack. He lunched on okra soup and kissed Zee goodbye, then rode eastward on back streets and cow-paths, his coat pockets clinking with flat pieces of slate that he skimmed in ricketing trees and winged sidearm at coarse, scolding dogs.

He urged his horse in the direction of Independence and into woods that were giving up the greens to autumn gold and brown. He ducked under aggravating limbs and criss-crossed through random alleys of scrub oak and scraggle where yellow leaves detached themselves at his least provocation. He could see the Missouri River in pickets and frames to his left, wide as a village and brown as a road, gradual in its procession. He came upon a hidden one-room barkwood shack with puncheon floor and goats on the porch and blue smoke unraveling from the chimney. A man booted with tawny mud produced a shotgun from behind a door. A woman shaded by a broad sunhat teetered with buckets in a hog pen, evaluating his carnage and disposition and horse.

Jackson County east of the Kansas City limits at that time enclosed a region called the Crack Neck that contained ramshackle farms and some erstwhile Confederate Army guerrillas who routinely sided with the James gang and provided seclusion to the outlaws following robberies. Within the region was Glendale, where two years earlier the gang had rifled a Chicago and Alton Railroad express car, and close to Glendale was Independence and a cooperage where Frank James squatted among the stave piles in back, eating a cucumber sandwich under the afternoon sun.

Jesse rode into the ring of shade beneath a huckleberry tree and canted his hat to conceal his face from the neighborhood; his brother tucked a sandwich corner into his cheek, regained his height, and wiped his broad mustache with his palm.

Frank was thirty-eight years old but looked a homely fifty. He was five feet ten inches tall at a time when such height was above average and weighed about one hundred fifty pounds. He had ears nearly the size of his hands and a very large, significant nose that seemed to hook and clamp his light brown mustache. His chin jutted, his jaw muscles bulged, his mouth was as straight and grim as a hatchet mark, and he'd ground down his teeth in his sleep until they all were as square as molars. He was a stern and very constrained man; he could have been a magistrate, an evangelist, a banker who farmed on weekends; rectitude and resolution influenced his face and comportment; scorn and even malevolence could be read in his green eyes.

Frank put a black cardigan sweater over his blue cavalry shirt and a gray coat over that, his scowling on two girls who lingered their dappled white ponies in the street and on a man with his hands in his pockets fifty yards removed.

Jesse yelled, "Me and him, we're circuit riders is why you never seen us beforehand."

The man continued to gawk. Frank untethered his mount and swung up and, as the two brothers ambled onto the eastward road, the man crossed to a hardware store to report his conclusions about the hard cases he'd observed.

Jesse said, "You stop for a meal in these burgs and you don't have to wait but five minutes for some fool to spend an opinion about the ugly strangers in town and what their appetites are like."

Frank said, "I'm gonna regret those cucumbers. They're gonna argue with me through evening."

Jesse glanced at his brother with concern. "What you need to do is tap some alum onto a dime, cook it with a matchstick, and lick it clean before you partake of your meals. That's the remedy for dyspepsia. You'll be cured inside of four days."

"You and your cures." Frank crossed in front of his brother, jamming his horse, and they turned left on a twin-rutted road and a median strip of grease-smearred, axle-flogged weeds. A great many animals had ganged on the road for a half-mile, then shambled into cannon-high straw grass that meandered into green bluffs. The James brothers pursued eccentric routes in that general direction. Jesse weaving right or left in his boredom, bending extravagantly from his saddle as he steered, shouting questions and assessments across the open to Frank. They meshed inside the woods, Frank ducking under an overhead bough that whapped dust from his coat shoulder, Jesse yanking his horse right and into a coulee where it noisily thrashed fallen leaves.

Ahead was brown shale and green ferns and humus where the sun was forbidden, and then two naked trees connected by twenty feet of hemp rope, to which had been reined a considerable number of horses. Here thirteen men squatted with coffee and idled or cradled shotguns: croppers and clerks and hired hands, aged in their late teens and twenties, wearing patched coveralls and wrinkled work trousers and foul-looking suit coats that exposed their wrists, or overcoats the color of nickel, of soot that assorted weeds had attached themselves to. They were hooligans, mainly, boys with vulgar features and sullen eyes and barn-red faces capped white above the eyebrows. They were malnourished and uneducated; their mouths were wrecks of rotting teeth. Consumption was a familiar disease, they carried infirmities like handkerchiefs; several were missing fingers, one was sick with parasites, another two had lice, eyes were crossed or clouded, harelip went undoctored.

Robert Woodson Hite and his simple younger brother, Clarence, were cousins from Adairville, Kentucky; Dick Liddil, Jim Cummins, Ed Miller, and Charley Ford had been in the James gang on previous occasions, the rest had been recruited to check the horses and divide the posses and parade with Henry rifles outside the passenger cars, firing on the recalcitrant and defiant. They bunched around the James brothers when they arrived that afternoon, several exhorting and goading Frank and Jesse in an exercise of kinship or special influence, the others wary and timid, slinking over and sniggering or investigating whatever was under their eyes.

The Jameses descended from their saddles and a lackey pulled the horses to wild feed and Jesse hunkered with coffee brewed from his own fine-ground beans and chatted with Ed Miller and Woodson Hite as some gangling boys eavesdropped. Jesse inquired if the Chicago and Alton managers had stationed guards in the depot or mail cars. He inquired about the nearest telegraph machine. He inquired about the time of sundown.

Meanwhile Frank quit the main group to reconnoiter the woods and the railroad and the meager farm and inhospitable cabin belonging to a man named Snead. He stood in green darkness and weed smoking a cigarette he'd made, perusing the sickle curve in the rails and a grade that was hard work for a locomotive. The southern cliff on which he tarried rose about thirty feet above the cinder roadbed, the northern ridge had been a lower elevation on a hill the railroad had excavated and was about ten feet above the cut. Three miles east was Glendale station. Mosquitoes and gnats hived in the air and inspected his ears but he did not slap at them because he was using his hearing to position some fool crashing through weed tangles and creepers to the left and rear of him. The noise stopped

and Frank opened his gray coat to slide his right hand across to his left pistol.

“Excuse me,” a boy shouted, “but I see I’ve sort of traipsed in and interrupted you.”

The voice was genial, golden, unrecognizable; Frank trudged up the hill some until he perceived a young man in a gray stovepipe hat and overlarge black coat that was reduced and cinched by a love slung holster. His thighs were clenched by green bushes. His hands were overhead, as if a gun were on him, and the cuffs had dropped deep on his forearms. He had ginger brown hair and very small ears and a sunburned face that could have prettied a girl except for lips that seemed slightly pursed and swollen. He looked to Frank like a simp and a snickerer, the sort to tantalize leashed dogs.

Frank queried, “Which one are you?”

“Bob Ford.”

“Ah, Charley’s brother.”

Bob received that as an invitation to lower his hands. His face creased with a wide smile that hung on as Frank stubbed his cigarette cold on a cottonwood trunk and returned to his inspection of the geography, disregarding Bob Ford.

The boy hunkered next to Frank and swatted his stovepipe hat around, dividing screens of mosquitoes and gnats that blew awry and rejoined and touched lighter than breath on his neck. He said, “I was lying when I said I just happened on down here. I’ve been on the scout, looking for you. I feel lousy that I didn’t say so at the outset.”

Frank dug in his pockets and extracted cigarette makings. He was not inclined to converse.

Bob scratched his hat-matted hair. “Folks sometimes take me for a nincompoop on account of the shabby first impression I make, whereas I’ve always thought of myself as being just a rung down from the James brothers. And, well, I was hoping if I ran into you aside from those peckerwoods, I could show you how special I am. I honestly believe I’m destined for great things, Mr. James. I’ve got qualities that don’t come shining through right at the outset, but give me a chance and I’ll get the job done—I can guarantee you that.”

Frank slimed the cigarette he’d made and struck a match off his boot sole. “You’re not so special, Mr. Ford.” He inhaled tobacco smoke and let it crawl from his mouth before he blew it. “You’re just like any other tyro who’s prinked himself up for an escapade; You’re hoping to be a gunslinger like those nickel books are about, but you may as well quench your mind of it. You don’t have the ingredients.”

“I’m sorry to hear you feel that way,” said Bob, “since I put such stock in your opinions.” He slapped a mosquito and looked at his blood-freckled palm and stood, rehatting his short, baby-fine hair. “As for me being a gunslinger, I’ve just got this one granddaddy Patterson Colt and a borrowed belt to stick it in. But I’ve also got an appetite for greater things. I hoped joining up with you would put me that much closer to getting them. And that’s the plain and simple truth of the matter.”

“So what do you want me to say?”

“You’ll let me be your sidekick tonight.”

“Sidekick?” said Frank. He’d heard the term applied solely to matched horses in a team-span.

“So you can see my grit and intelligence.”

Frank examined his cigarette, sucked it once more, and flipped it onto a roadbed tie where the butt was later shredded under a railroad detective’s laced shoe. He said, “I don’t know what it is about you, but the more you talk, the more you give me the willies. I don’t believe I even want you as close as earshot this evening.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Why don’t you go?” Frank said and the boy tramped up the hill, slapping weeds aside.

THE LATE CLELL MILLER’S kid brother Ed had imposed a large iron pot in the hoop of his saddle lariat

and he and Dick Liddil scrounged for wild onions and scarecrowed vegetables as Jesse gardened hurrant into a second hour. He cut and rooted and cultivated until he'd worked on Shelby in the Civil War and the might of iron submarines and Mrs. Mary Todd Lincoln's hysterics. Often he was facetious, but no one adventured a smile until Jesse did. His audience varied according to jobs they were expected to perform—steeds needed tending, roads needed watching, rookies were bossed into cooking chores—and each vacated seat was bullied over as Jesse continued what he liked to call wabash.

His cousin Robert Woodson Hite remained on his left, sulking and mooning the afternoon through over some imagined slight. Next to Wood was his nineteen-year-old brother, Clarence, who was stooped and consumptive and slack-jawed, and as void of calculation as a sponge. Persevering to the end was Charley Ford, who snorkled mucus and spit it, who chuckled and hee-hawed soon after the others did, continuing on with his bray seconds after the others had ceased, and who covered his left boot with a corrupted coat in order to conceal a clubfoot that practiced walking had made practically imperceptible. He had abetted the ransacking of the express car on the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railway, which the James gang had boarded on July 15th, and gave accommodations to the outlaws afterward at his sister's place near Richmond. So he was in good favor. His brother William had married the sister of Jim Cummins, which was how Charley was initially noticed, and he hunted pigeons and turtledoves with Ed Miller, who had recruited him into the James gang by introducing him to Jesse on a gambling night in 1879—he had impressed Jesse as a savvy, sporting man then; just how Charley never could fathom.

Charles Wilson Ford was a rail-thin, rough, and likeably ignorant country boy who apologized for his failings before they could be found out: there was something of a good-natured dog about him, something hungry and grateful and vulnerable that made up for his general vulgarity. His lackluster brown eyes were sunk in his skull and his right eye was slanted enough to look askilter and borrowed and slapdash. Mismatched also were his ears (the right appeared to have taken wing), and his teeth (his overbite made it seem as if he were incessantly sucking his lower lip). He had heavy black eyebrows and a black mustache no coarser than body hair, that never seemed more than a random smear of newsprint under his nose. His complexion was pestered with acne, his fingers often looked shoe-grimed, he spoke with a paltry lisp that somehow made him seem younger than twenty-four.

Jesse was on the subject of the first electric power plant, which Thomas A. Edison was constructing on Pearl Street in New York City. He explained, incorrectly, how the incandescent lamp worked, and Charley stabbed at the dirt with a stick or pinched scarlet eruptions on his shoulder and neck or measured the others with sidelong glances. Then a boy in a gray stovepipe hat emerged from the snaggles and claws of the woods and reached into the blue smoke of the fire and praised the miscellaneous stew and principally slouched about doing fraudulent chores in order to eavesdrop on Jesse. At last Clarence Hite relinquished his seat and the boy pushed John Bugler aside and capered over boots and legs and wormed down next to Charley Ford with the incivility and intrusion that bespoke brotherhood. The boy had been introduced to Jesse more than once but the outlaw saw no reason then to store the kid's name, and now, as he culled a list that Frank had read aloud Monday night, he kept returning to the name Bunny. The boy nodded like a horse whenever Jesse's words seemed to want affirmation; whenever Jesse leavened his chat with humor the younger Ford boomed and laughed overloudly and infectiously with whoops and idiotic rises, like a knuckle-run on a piano. He wore the light-checkered blue eyes that never strayed, the ears that picked up each nuance and joke, the amen looks that suggested he understood Jesse as no one else could.

Frank returned from his reconnaissance and scowled at the loiterers even as he drank black coffee with a carefree Jim Cummins. Dick Liddil rattled a wooden kitchen tool around inside the iron pot and sang "Chowtime!" and the gang filed by the fire with invented spoons and bowls. The Ford boy was the last to get up, finding his legs only when Jesse stood and closing on him like a valet.

“Am I too late to wish you Happy Birthday?”

Jesse grinned. “How’d you know?”

Bob Ford ticked his head. “You’d be surprised at what I’ve got stored away. I’m an authority on the James boys.”

Jesse asked, “Your name isn’t Bunny Ford, is it?”

The boy was so avid to second whatever Jesse said that he nearly admitted it was, but checked himself and corrected, “Why no. It’s Robert Ford.”

“Of course it is.”

“Bob.”

Jesse simpered a little and walked to the fire; Bob sidled and hopped to keep in stride with him. Jesse said, “I don’t recollect: you’ve never been with the gang before, have you?”

“Oh no sirree. I’m a virgin.” Bob thumbed back his stovepipe hat and grinned just as Jesse might. “At least in that one respect, if you get my meaning.”

“Yes?”

“I’ve been fretting and fidgeting like I had ants down my pants the entire afternoon. Your brother and I had a real nice visit over toward the railroad, chatting about this and that, enjoying each other’s company, but otherwise I’ve been organizing my mind and working at calming my innards.”

“Cook alum,” Jesse said, and took a heaped bowl and spoon from a man in a gunnysack approach. Jesse lowered onto a stump in his vast gray coat and Bob sat on the earth at his feet with his holster removed and his own coat opened for rather overdue ventilation. Jesse chewed and wiped his mouth on his hand. “Do you know what this stew needs?”

“Dumplings?”

“Noodles. You eat yourself some noodle stew and your clock will tick all night. You ever see that woman over in Fayette could suck noodles up her nose?”

“Don’t believe I have,” said Bob.

“You’ve got canals in your head you never dreamed of.”

Bob was scraping his stew out of a blue envelope. Juice broke from a corner and spoiled his trouser fly in a manner that suggested incontinence. He would not notice this until later. He flapped the envelope into the fire and licked his spoon with a hound’s care before submerging it in his pocket. He said, “Your brother Frank and I had just a real nice visit this afternoon. Must’ve been a hundred subjects entertained, having to do with the Chicago and Alton Railroad and the U.S. Express Company and assignments on board the cars.”

Jesse had closed his eyes but kept the spoon in his mouth. He exercised a crick in his neck.

Bob went on. “Well, the upshot of our visit together was we sort of mutually agreed that the best thing for all parties concerned would be if I could use my *huge* abilities as your helper and, you know, apprentice. So we could be confederates together and come out of this unscathed. That was the upshot.”

“Well, Buck does the figuring.” Jesse looked at his bowl of stew. “Do you want the rest of this?”

“I’m sorta off my feed.”

“Hate to waste it.”

“My innards are riled as it is.”

Jesse arose and dumped his leftovers into the iron pot and gave over his bowl and spoon to a boy for washing. He said to Bob, “If you order a beefsteak in a restaurant and they don’t broil it long enough? Don’t ever send it back, because if you do the cook spits all over your food; tinctures something putrid.”

Bob was dumbfounded. He said, “I don’t like to harp on a subject but—”

“I don’t care who comes with me,” Jesse said. “Never have. I’m what they call gregarious.”

Bob smiled in his never-quit way. Frank was drinking coffee and scowling again as he walked over from the far side of the fire. Jesse raised his voice. "I hear tell you and young Stovepipe here had a real nice visit."

Frank looked askance at Robert Ford and flung on the ground the remains of his coffee. He dried the tin cup with his elbow. "Your boys have about an acre of rock to haul, Dingus. You'd better goos them down yonder."

THEY SKIDDED a rain-surrendered cottonwood tree down the bank and horsed it over the polished steel rails, ripping bark away from the bone-colored wood. They carried limestone and sandstone and earth sprinkling rocks that were the sizes of infants and milk cans and sleeping cats, and these they hilled and forted about the tree as shovels sang and picks splintered and inveigling footpaths caved in along the vertical Blue Cut excavations. Jesse supervised the rock-piling, recommending land to be mined for stone, dedicating his men to various jobs once the locomotive was shut down, chewing a green cigar black. Shadows grew into giants and died as the sun burned orange and sank. Mosquitoes flitted from hand to cheek until a night wind channeled east on the tracks and carried the insects away, even tore the ash of cigarettes and battened light coats over backs on the higher exposures. Clouds bricked overhead and were brindled pink, then crimson and violet; leaves sailed like paper darts and the air carried the tang of cattle and hogs and chimney smoke.

Frank was a solemn sentinel on the southern ridge, big as a park bronze of the honored dead, two inches taller than most of his men and majestic with confidence and dignity and legend. Bob Ford heaved rock and yanked the horses to creek water and stirred the camp fire out, and each time he passed Frank James he said "Hello" or "How do you do?" until Dick Liddil indicated that robber crossed paths with each other many times in the course of an evening to-do and Frank considered it silly to even once exchange pleasantries.

Jesse, on the other hand, was the soul of friendliness and commerce, acknowledging each of Bob's remarks, letting the boy ingratiate himself, rewarding him with trivial tasks that Bob executed with zeal. Then he asked Bob to strike a match as he read the dial of a pocket watch in a gold hunting case, stolen from a judge near Mammoth Cave. The clock instructed him and he retreated into the darkness and after some minutes returned with a kerosene lantern and with a burlap grain sack over his arm like a waiter's towel. "You can stick with me but don't heel. I don't want to bust into you every time you have the notion to change direction."

Bob muttered, "I'm not a moron, for Heaven's sake," but his irritation was quiet and his head bowed—one might have thought his boots had ears.

Jesse wasn't listening anyway. He scrubbed his teeth with his linen shirt collar and bulged his lips and cheeks with his cleansing tongue. He curtained his coat halves over his unmatched, pearl-handled pistols (a .44 caliber Smith and Wesson and a Colt .45 in crossed holsters), but he kept his gray suit jacket buttoned at the lapels in accordance with fashion. He told the boy, "They're supposed to have a hundred thousand dollars in that express car; at least that's what the gossip is."

Bob smiled, but there was something incorrect and tortured about it. He said, "My fingers are already starting to itch."

Jesse squatted and struck a match and turned up the flame on the lantern, then wadded a red flannel sleeve around the glass chimney under the curled wire protectors. The yellow light rubbed.

"That's ideal," Frank called. He was on the south ridge above Jesse and the railroad tracks, up where the grade increased and horseshoed to the right, about twenty yards east of the rock accumulation on the rails. Dick Liddil, Wood Hite, Jim Cummins, Ed Miller, and Charley Ford were near Frank, murmuring and smoking and sitting or squatting with rifles erect on their thighs, the fingers inside the trigger housings. The Cracker Neck boys, the sickly sharecroppers and have-nots

had congregated with Jesse and been instructed to range along Blue Cut's northern ridge, which they did in a lackadaisical fashion: they rambled far down the tracks, grew lonesome, rejoined, huddled, bummed cigarettes, strewed out again and perilously crossed paths with each other in the night of the woods. Frank commented, "They're going to trip and shoot each other into females."

Dick Liddil said, "I bet I can find them husbands if they do," and that jollied even Frank.

Jesse held the lantern over his pocket watch. Both hands were near the IX. He said, "About two years ago we robbed the same railroad, only it was right in Glendale we boarded her."

"I know that," said Bob, a little peeved and superior. "You may not realize it yet but I'm a storehouse of information about the James gang. I mean, I've followed your *careers*." Bob had snipped two eyeholes from a white handkerchief and this he stuffed under his stovepipe hat so that it concealed all but his mouth and chin. However, he had cut one hole slightly low and inside of where it should have been, resulting in a mask that gave the impression he was cock-eyed and pitiable, which was not at all what he had in mind.

Jesse looked at him curiously but recommended no alterations. His concerns were apparently historical. "Do you know what happened five years ago to the day? To the *day*? What happened on September seventh in eighteen seventy-six?"

"You made an attempt on a Northfield, Minnesota, bank." Bob rummaged in his memory and asked, "Was it owned by General Ben Butler? The Scourge of New Orleans?"

"That's right," said Jesse.

"Knew it."

Jesse said, "Bill Chadwell, Clell Miller, Charlie Pitts—they were killed outright. The Youngers have been in prison ever since. It's painful to recall."

Bob added unnecessarily, "And you never got a plug nickel from that bank."

Jesse failed to register a facial reaction; he merely replied, "So you can see how this date would have an aroma for me."

Then Jesse seemed to pick up a sound as a receptive animal might, twisting sharply to the east, specifying and assessing and then grasping his lantern to walk off the cliff, hopping down ten feet and three plunging, dirt-sloshing steps. He stamped his boots (a pain shooting up his injured ankle) and shook out his trouser cuffs, then knelt to hear locomotive noise translate through the rails. The steel was warm and burnished with wear and smooth as a spoon to his ear. The hum was like insects in a jar. He called to his older brother, "She's right on schedule, Buck."

Frank was smoking another cigarette and beguiling Dick Liddil and Charley Ford with long passages from *The Life of King Henry the Fifth*, ending with, " 'But if it be a sin to covet honor, I am the most offending soul alive.' "

Dick Liddil asked, "How much of that you got memorized?"

"Over a thousand lines."

"You're a man of learning."

"Yes, I am." Frank rubbed his cigarette out against the rough bark of a tree. "You'd better get down to Jesse."

Jesse raised his blue bandana over his nose as soon as he could make out the boiler cadence, and he placed his right boot on the rail as Dick Liddil slid down the southern cliff, ouching and cussing and clutching weed brakes. Dick then tied a red bandana over his nose and ambled over, shaking dust from a beige shirt and from brown pants that were so long for his legs and were so creased with constant use that they looked like concertinas.

The locomotive's chuffing was growing loud. Jesse's right foot tickled with rail vibrations. Frank looked around and saw Liddil to his right with his Navy Colt hung in his hand, the Hites and Ed Miller to the east, preparing to strongarm the passengers, many other boys ranged along the cut with Henry

rifles slung over their wrists, Bob Ford on the cliff behind him, looking like a gunfighter.

~~Jesse could hear the locomotive decelerate on the grade, hear the creaks and complaints as the~~ carriages listed north on the curve. The brass headlamp's aisle of white light filled the passage called Blue Cut and streaked across scrub brush and into the forest, causing Charley Ford to blind his eyes and then the light bent and flooded toward Jesse. The cowcatcher hunted the tracks and the black smoke billowed into hillocks and mountains over the smokestack and train, and Jesse swung his flannel-red lantern over the rails in a yardmaster's signal to stop.

The engineer was Chappy Foote. He had his elbow and goggled head out the cab window and his left fingers on the handle for the steam brake valve. On seeing the lantern, he leaned his body out and concluded that a freight train had stalled on the grade until he saw the man's bandana and ten yards behind him the high rubble on the rails. He turned to his fireman as he yanked the valve handle and yelled, "Looks like we're going to be robbed!"

The young stoker, John Steading, cupped his ear because of the boiler roar but picked up enough of the sentence to swing out for a look and say, "Mercy."

Jesse avoided the cowcatcher and saw the toggle-joint between the brake blocks rise, compelling them against the steel tires with a scream that made him clamp his ears. Hot steam broke over him and couplings banged and sparks sliced off the rails. The running speed had been twenty-five miles per hour; it was fifteen a few seconds later; then five. Steamer trunks slid; the mail agent was thrown enough to punch through a slot of the walnut route sorter, bruising his thumbnail and knuckle; a fireman in the sleeper careered half its length and clobbered the door like a rolling piano; in the caboose a mechanic used his handkerchief to dab macaroni soup off his clothes. The engineer braked in time to creep the locomotive into the rubble, the cowcatcher just kissing the rock with the *chunk* of a closed ice-box door.

They could hear a quartet of Englishmen in the Pullman car singing pleasantly, "Come out, 'tis now September, the hunter's moon's begun, and through the wheat and stubble is heard the distant gun. The leaves are paling yellow and trembling into red, and the free and happy barley is hanging down its head."

Then the gang was running and bounding and skidding down the embankments. Jesse watched as Bob Ford slid down like a debutante in petticoats, his left hand snatching at weeds and roots as his right unveiled his eyes enough to peek around at the commotion. Men were rushing alongside the train and levering their rifles and slouching about in a manner they fancied was ghoulish and frightening. Frank James was on the south side of the train with a rifle slack in his arms, his cardigan sweat-soaked and closed with a fist, instructing everybody. Steam trickled from the locomotive trucks and spirited in the breeze, and the engine huffed "church" and once again "church" and then sighed with embering fire. Jesse hiked onto a cab step and brandished his cocked revolver.

The engineer cringed down under his hands, shouting, "Don't shoot! Ain't no call for that!"

And Jesse said, "You two best come down from your machine and bring a coal pick along."

Chappy Foote replied, "You've got the gun," and obediently removed his goggles and hooked them over the brake handle. His stoker was scared sick and worked at getting his gumption back by resting on the fold-down bench, his sweat crawling over the filth of his face. He looked about sixteen. The engineer dropped a coal pick onto the cinder bed and lingered on each step as he climbed down. The stoker followed, neglecting the last two rungs. Then Jesse shook the hands of both workers, introducing himself as Jesse James, the man they'd read so much about.

AFTER THE LOCOMOTIVE slammed to a halt on the grade known as Independence Hill, a porter named Charles Williams bent down from the platform of the ladies' coach (where tobacco smoke was forbidden) and made out three or four men near the engine and Chappy Foote disembarking onto the

cinder bed. Williams was a small, brook-no-guff child of ex-slaves, dressed in a brass-buttoned, navy blue uniform and a blue hat that was cocked on his head. He retrieved his lantern, intending to learn the nature of the predicament, but no sooner did he scurry around the cars than a man near the caboose shouted, "Get back inside, you black bastard!" and four bisecting gunshots sent him back onto the platform. He opened the door to the ladies' coach and saw the women inside lowering the thirty-foot curtains and concealing valuables, hiking their skirts to tuck folding money under their corsets, poking jewels into their brassieres, shoving purses and necklaces under seat cushions. (One woman who had secreted over a thousand dollars and a delicate watch in her stockings would compliantly offer her embroidered handbag to Frank James and have it courteously refused.) Men rushed in from the smoker chucking dollars into their derby hats and then sloped down in their seats with their children huddled next to them or under lamp tables or between the tasseled chairs and the walls.

Williams scurried down the coach and ducked out the rear door at the end of the passageway. (The vestibules that connected coaches and kept out the weather had not yet been invented; the only protection was a platform railing and roof.) He snuck down the stairs and saw three masked men beneath the lamplit second compartment of the sleeper, one man smoking a cigarette, another kicking soot clods from the carriage. It had been several minutes since they'd stopped the train, they wanted to do some activities and hobbies; soon they'd be looking for bottles to break.

The man with the cigarette glanced over and inched his shotgun at the porter. He said, "Better get back inside, you black devil, or you'll have your head blowed off."

That would have been Ed Miller, who was only a few months away from having his own skull shot in;

THE CONDUCTOR was named Joel Hazelbaker. He was a severe man who had for ten years worked on freight trains and broke most of the bones in his fists boxing hobos. When the locomotive braked and swung down to the roadbed to determine what the cause was and witnessed the gang swooping down into the cut. He told the crowd in the second-class coach about the robbery in progress and then had the presence of mind to trot around the bend toward the caboose to solicit a flag man. They had overtaken a freight earlier and he was afraid it would crash into them (a common accident then) unless warned: the back cars would accordion, the freight's boiler would explode. Near the first-class palace cars, Hazelbaker encountered a raincoated man with two revolvers who was crouched like a nickel book gunfighter and who ordered him to halt but listened when Hazelbaker explained that he had to stop the freight train. A brakeman named Frank Burton tottered over the smoker roof and climbed down with a red lantern, and the two hurried back to the caboose but were shot at with so many rounds that Hazelbaker was momentarily convinced the outlaws commanded an R. J. Gatling cluster gun. He saw Frank Burton's coat flapping with near-misses as the boy ran on and then the shooting sputtered as Frank James walked the roadbed irritably waving his arms overhead, calling in a big voice, "Cease firing!" over and over again. Frank James simmered, searched out an oaf to hit, found his cousin Clarence Hite, and cuffed him on the ear. He then gave the conductor permission to proceed.

Hazelbaker would later recall for newspaper reporters that he and Burton needed to run less than ten rods beyond the caboose before the freight locomotive announced itself with many long whistles, the engineer having guessed at a problem ahead because of occasional boiler sparks he'd seen swirling through the crowns of trees. The brakeman motioned the lantern across the rails, as Jesse had, and when the locomotive's brakes screeched into lock on the tires, the conductor returned to the rear of the sleeper, unhooking his nickel-plated watch and chain from his vest and unsnapping a leather wallet that was big as a summons envelope and attached to his suspenders with a shoelace. He separated his seventy-five dollars from that evening's railroad collections and released his cash and time-piece into an iron water tank that was lashed next to the Pullman door. The watch made a gone-forever noise

the water and Hazelbaker's stomach queered.

ON THAT TRAIN the express and baggage and mail cars had been combined into one green, windowless coach with government property divided from the rest by means of a wooden partition and screen. The mail agent was O. P. Melloe. After the locomotive stopped, he opened the door on the north and sagged on the doorframe to observe the gang's business with the engineer. He also saw that in the rear section of the car the baggagemaster and express messenger had tilted their heads out the open door at radically different heights. The baggage-master said, "Opie? We're going to bolt this door from the inside."

"I'd say that's a good idea," said Melloe.

Their door slammed and through the chicken wire above the partition the mail agent heard the two young men shuffle bags and boxes. He ascended canvas bags of mail until he could see the two men stacking chicken coops, thereby forbidding detection underneath of the Adams Express Company safe that was also en route to Kansas City. Melloe said, "If they push you to the brink, do what you must to save your skin."

Henry Fox, the messenger, banged down a crate of plumbing fixtures and glanced around for other valuables to camouflage. Fox answered, "Thanks for the reminder, Opie."

Melloe descended from the crushed mail sacks and leaned against the doorframe with his door opened just enough to see out. A man in a Confederate officer's coat and blue bandana mask had limped down to the express section with the young fireman in tow by his shirt collar, and a wiry boy with a stovepipe hat and overlarge coat was menacing Foote in the direction of the express car.

Upon arrival at the express section, Chappy Foote ineffectually tried the doorknob and the invited recommendations about what he should do since the express company's door gave every indication that it was locked and could not be forced. Jesse recoiled his revolver hammer (the click like a barber cracking his knuckles) and recommended, "Why don't you smash it in." He then maneuvered over to Bob Ford as Foote grunted the coal pick into an underhand swing and rounded it overhead into the door near the latch, loudly splintering the wood and embedding the spike so that he had to waggle the handle to extricate it. Jesse confided to Bob, "The locked doors and the smashing them down, that's a little skit we run through each time—sort of like grace before dinner."

The engineer oofed and drove the coal pick again and the wood submitted to the blow, screaming and folding inward near the edge. The messenger saw they'd get in anyway, so he pulled the bottom and overhead bolts free inside, saying, "All right! You can come in now!" and Jesse moved forward to sock the kickboard so that the door gave in, quivering into darkness. Henry Fox retreated with his hands high as the baggagemaster snuffed the lights. Jesse ordered the engineer to roost in the weeds with his stoker and ordered Bob Ford to guard them. Bob poked his revolver into Foote's side and the two railroadmen walked rather routinely off the cinder bed and sat down. Jesse heaved his chest on the threshold of the express car and kned himself into the room. Dick Liddil and the come-late Charley Ford imitated Jesse and lighted a lantern as Jesse lifted packages and shook them and guessed at their contents. "That's a woman's satchel," he said. "All fancy bead work and paper flowers."

"Could be," said the baggageman. His smile didn't know whether to hold on or vanish.

Jesse smashed another box on a nail and snagged it open, finding inside a photograph of a child in an oval frame, the cheek torn by the nail. Jesse flung it against the ceiling, adjusted his blue bandana over his nose, and glared at the express manager. "I want you to open that safe."

Fox looked to the baggagemaster for counsel. The man's head was down. Fox looked back at the robber with a nervous smile, his fright making him seem complaisant and insolent. Charley Ford stepped over and struck Henry Fox over the skull with his pistol, the concussion like gloved hands clapping loudly once, like a red apple pitched at a tree. The blow chopped the messenger down to his

knees with blood shoelacing his face and the baggagemaster backed to the green wall with horror. Liddil said, "You didn't have to bop him, Charley."

"Yes, he did," said Jesse. "They need the convincing. They got their company rules and I got my mean streak and that's how we get things done." Charley grinned with accomplishment and Jesse cleared some registers off the only safe he could see, one no larger than the knee-hole in a lady's dresser. "Come over here and attend to this now."

Melloe was at the partition. He exclaimed, "You all right over there?"

Dick Liddil heard a wild and scrambled fusillade and leaned outside to see the Crackers firing a conductor and brakeman who were crouching with a red lantern. Frank James was hollering for them to cease, and after twenty rounds they did. Bob Ford was squatting in the weeds, his gun cocked up next to his cheek. "Scare ya?" Dick called, and Bob stood with no little chagrin. "I couldn't tell what on earth was going on!"

Fox gathered himself and dialed numbers on the U.S. Express Company vault and after two failures had the combination correct enough to jerk the door open. Then the baggagemaster helped him over the chicken coops, on which he sat down heavily, cracking two frames. The baggagemaster carefully backed onto the coop that covered the Adams Express Company safe, where the great amount of money was.

It was Charley Ford who emptied the U.S. Express Company safe, with such concentration and sedulousness that he stole receipts, waybills, non-negotiable notes, and a calendar schedule of express deliveries, in addition to more than six thousand dollars in mixed currencies. Jesse then tested the weight of the grain sack and slunk over to the lantern, puzzling over the contents. "Isn't no hundred thousand dollars here, Dick?"

Dick looked into the grain sack himself and said, "I'm *real* disappointed."

Bob Ford was standing over the engineer and stoker when Jesse jumped down to the cinder bed from the express car and encouraged the messenger and baggagemaster outside with his gun. Blood had trickled into Henry Fox's right eye, so he looked at Bob with his left as he staggered over the weeds and crashed down.

Bob gaped at the injury with some panic; Fox admitted to the railroad crewmen that he had a gruesome headache; Jesse was walking with Charley and Dick as he called that they were going to go through the cars. "If any of them so much as twitch, give their coconuts a sockdolager: that's language they understand."

BY THAT TIME Frank James had ascended the stairs at the rear of the ladies' coach, catching himself with the brass door pull as an ache branched over his chest. Ed Miller and Clarence Hite climbed after him and Ed Miller entered the coach first, his boot slamming the door aside, an eyeholed flour sack over his head, his sawed-down twelve-gauge straight ahead of his right pocket. He was reported to have said, "Throw up your hands, you sons-a-bitches!" and then, for emphasis, slapped a man in the mouth.

Then Frank James strolled inside in his gray coat and yellow bandana mask, looking colossal and mean and sick. He saw about thirty men either cowering or flinching or accusing him with censorious eyes, while the wives scrunched down behind their husbands' shoulders. He hypothesized at least twenty handguns among the travelers, so he strode down the aisle, imperious as Victoria's consort, his boot-heels barking on the oakwood flooring, and he scowled and lingered over those investors and vacationers who seemed recalcitrant, ticking a button or collar with his Remington .44 Frontier revolver, which he would surrender to Governor Crittenden in little more than a year.

Frank shouted, "Are any of you preachers?"

No one raised a hand.

He shouted, "Are any of you widows?"

~~Some frowned with curiosity.~~

He said, "We never rob preachers or widows."

Four hands shot up.

"No; no, you're too late."

Having satisfied himself that he had conquered any thoughts of rebellion, Frank nodded to the rear of the coach and an emaciated Clarence Hite scuttled in, a Colt Navy .36 caliber six-gauge dominating his right hand. He had a skulking hunchbacked look and his hazel eyes kept doubling back, checking his actions with his cousin. He punched his revolver into the green, knee-length coat of the man and said, "I'm Jesse James, ya damned yellow dog! Gimme your money!"

The man fiddled his hand inside his coat and presented Clarence with a worn envelope containing seventy-five dollars and with an English gold watch that would fastidiously chime the hour no matter what skullduggery Clarence was up to at the moment. Clarence shoved the gray-haired man back and joyfully dangled the watch and envelope in Frank's direction. Frank came back down the aisle and chucked the goods inside the belly of his shirt, and Ed Miller, Clarence Hite, and the infamous Frank James sallied down the coach, stealing coins, dollars, watches, bracelets, rings, stickpins, pendants.

From the express car that was just behind the locomotive and tender came Jesse, Charley, and Dick. They clanged up the stairs at the head of the smoker, saw it was vacant, and rushed down the lighted car, sliding a little on the narrow Persian runner, ringing a brass spittoon against an oak Doric pedestal. Upon reaching the platform, Jesse rapped on the coach's door with his gun; Frank swiveled and waved him in; Dick and Charley jostled ahead into the coach as Frank shouted, "Just work your way toward the middle."

So a number of feuding, keening voices mixed as the gang visited each adult and ordered him or her to shell out. If too meager a sum was exchanged, a cocked revolver was pressed to the person's forehead and he was told to delve a little further. A bearded man with spectacles lost seven hundred dollars to Ed Miller but Jesse had a hunch about him and after a bickering investigation turned up one hundred dollars more. According to Williams, a Dutchman had managed to remain asleep ever since he dined in Columbia and when Charley socked him awake he at once assumed he was being asked for a fare he'd already paid. Charley pushed his revolver into the Dutchman's cheek and stole the three hundred dollars with which the man intended to purchase a farm in Joplin. Mr. C. R. Camp was host to a tour of New York land buyers and later tallied their losses at \$4,021. Clarence Hite squatted to remove the white shoes from an infant so he could poke his finger inside and rescue God knows what John O'Brien had stuffed inside his pants a bundle of several hundred dollars clenched by a rubber band, and on the demand of Frank James delivered one thousand dollars that had been for business expenses. The bundle of his own money slithered to the floor and rolled as Frank walked on and O'Brien's small daughter redeemed it, saying, "Here's some more money, Papa!" Frank turned and snatched it from her hand. Dick Liddil dictated that Mrs. C. A. Dunakin raise her hands overhead and whirl four times as he inspected her. He said, "Next time we pull off a job like this we'll have a ladder along to search you female passengers." She retorted, "You might have a woman with you or a man dressed as one, but you'll never have a lady." An immigrant had his wallet tossed in a sack and so beseeched Jesse to recover it so he could withdraw his insurance papers. His plea was denied as too time-consuming. Children wailed in corners, several women became hysterical and remained so throughout the night; men sat in chairs with blank faces, their hands lumped in their laps, having lost their fortunes: their crabbed savings, the cost of a cottage, the auction sale of six Holstein cows, a laggard Silver Anniversary watch.

Jesse squeezed past the porter, Williams, who had already been frisked, and pushed into the sleeping car, flinging green velvet drapes aside as he passed each berth. He shocked a yellow o-

woman whose hair was braided, whose frail hands were in prayer; otherwise the sleeper seemed empty until he parted the exit drapes and saw in the foyer two women in nightgowns and a piano of a fat man all huddled around the conductor. Something in the group's timidity dispirited Jesse and he exited onto the platform, where he saw that Frank and some of the others were on the cinder bed shedding loot into a flour sack. Near the caboose were workers on the freight train who'd slunk forward innocuously watch and whisper about the activities. Horses had been fetched and they nickered and fussed in the attic of weeds and timber over the cut. Wood Hite and Ed Miller had entered the sleeper with fire axes that they used to rip bedding off and snag mattresses from their boxes. The gang's visitation on the Chicago and Alton had now lasted nearly forty-five minutes and was beginning to deteriorate into carousal. Jesse went back inside the sleeping car and shouted, "Okay! Let's vamoose!" Then he twisted the neck of his grain sack and limped forward outside the sleeper and ladies' coach exaggerating the heft of the valuables as the victims peeked under the curtains. He saw Frank Burton sitting on a platform, looking bankrupt, and asked how much was stolen from him. The young brakeman answered that he'd given up fifty cents and that was all he had.

It was later recorded that Jesse dug into the grain sack and gave Burton a dollar and fifty cents saying, "This is principal and interest on your money."

Jesse delivered the loot to Jim Cummins, who'd reappeared after one of his typical evaporations and he uttered a kindness to Henry Fox, who was looking scalped and catatonic, his ears sirening. (He resigned from his job within the month and sued the express company for damages, without luck.) Having been relieved of his assignment, Bob Ford scabbled up the bank to the woods and scuttled through bracken, nettles, and thorns to the gathered horses, where he removed the white mask with the cut-out eyes. Charley Ford sidled over to his kid brother and said, "I was in top form tonight."

"That messenger, he's going to have trouble recalling his *name!*"

Charley leered. "Surely gave him a goose-egg, didn't I?"

"Goodness!"

Charley asked, "Did you see me roast that one gent for standing on his cash?"

"No," Bob said, "I missed that. I was outside, y'see."

"He kind of skidded when he walked was how I knew. Must've had his shoe atop fifty dollars. And his wife, she was in a state, her beady little eyes all squinched up."

"Really took the cake, did she?"

"Oh my, yes," said Charley. "Jesse's gonna be satisfied with me."

Jesse James was then walking the engineer to a locomotive that was slowly susurrating, his right arm slung over Foote's shoulders, his manner affectionate and delighted, his mood invigorating. At the cab Jesse athletically shook the man's hand, leaving a silver coin in the engineer's palm like a sidewalk magician. Chappy Foote later claimed he said, "You are a valiant man and I am a little stuck on you. Here's a dollar so you can drink to the health of Jesse James tomorrow morning."

"Obliged" was all that Foote could think to mutter.

"Now, what about that roadblock? Shall I have the gang remove those stones? I could hitch a team to that cottonwood and tow it right off the rails."

"No, don't bother. To tell you the truth, about the best thing you could do for me is take yourself and your party far away from here."

Jesse said, "All right, partner. Good night," and clambered up the bank in his billowing gray coat reducing into darkness.

THE JAMES GANG walked their horses south through scrub brush and over fire ash that was no warmer than a morning bed. They loped onto a road and into a gully and threshed through a cornfield with tassels high as the saddle cantles. There Frank moved among the veterans, distributing each man

allotment of cash and luxuries, auctioning off the gold watches and Mexican jewels, burning the securities and non-negotiable papers. Clarence Hite would later confess that each share was one hundred forty dollars but he was wretched at sums and unlikely to suspect chicanery, so it is probable that he was cheated, as were Andy Ryan, John Bugler, John Land, and Matt and Creed Chapman. Jesse had already piloted them over to a cowpath by a creek and, according to John Land, explained, "Boys, we just haven't got time to divide the loot now—they're too hot for us—and we didn't get the money we expected to anyhow, but we'll all meet on the right fork of the Blue River a week from tonight and you'll get your cut there." He never really intended to meet them again; the country boys were only meant to provide security during the robbery and easy prey for the sheriff afterward. On the night of the 7th, they rode off in five directions, feeling rather pleased with themselves, but by the evening of September 10th, Andy Ryan and John Land had been arrested in shacks near Glendale, Matt Chapman and John Bugler had been jailed, and Creed Chapman was only weeks away from a six-month imprisonment in which he lost forty-two pounds.

The James gang segregated into three groups before riding out of the cornfield. Jim Cummins and Ed Miller navigated eastward for Miller's house in Saline County; Dick Liddil and Wood Hite crossed the river near Blue Mills in order to rusticate on the rented farm of Martha Bolton, the widowed sister of the Fords, whom they were both trying to romance; the James brothers, the Ford brothers, and Clarence Hite rode west into Kansas City under a cold rain that moved over them from the north and knuckled their hats and sank their horses inches deep in the mire of wide, empty streets.

Zee James was asleep on the sofa when her husband creaked the kitchen door and surprised her awake with a kiss, and she boiled water in a saucepan as Jesse chaired himself in his soaked coat and lied unnecessarily about a cattle auction in Independence where he'd purchased twenty steers at below market price and right away sold them by an exchange of telegrams with a livestock buyer in Omaha.

Zee didn't raise her eyes from the saucepan. "So you've got money again?"

"Come out of it real satisfactory." He was jubilant and still energized by adrenaline, and in excitement he had come to crave like caffeine. He jumped up from his chair and gandered out at the red barn. He said, "Guess who I ran into."

She gave Jesse a wifely look and got a jar down from a pantry shelf.

He said, "Buck, for one. Then Clarence Hite and two coves of his. They're with the animals right now."

"They do satisfactory at the auction too?"

He grinned. "About the most they ask is that they come out of a swap with all their toes and fingers." He then adjusted a dry hat on his head and without justifying his exit went out to the stables.

Red coal-oil lanterns gladdened the interior of the barn but Frank James was glooming about and glaring at the younger men's slipshod management of their horses. He saw Jesse at the Dutch door and sat on a long bench, his legs wide and his forearms on them, his rough hands joined around a yellowed cigarette. The James brothers were not exceptionally close as boys and as they grew older were scarcely a pair—more than occasionally they were not even on speaking terms—so it was not particularly surprising that Jesse preferred not to seek out Frank's company but stood just inside the sloshing eave and peered at his melancholy and peaked cousin Clarence and then at Charley Ford, who gave up wiping the waxy coat of his mare to attempt juggling the weighted pins that Jesse had dropped in the stall. Then Jesse abruptly perceived that the stripling Bob Ford had approached from his right. "You must've creeped up on cat's paws."

Bob smiled. "I'll wager that's the first and last time you'll ever be caught off-guard." He no longer wore the overlarge coat or stovepipe hat, only green trousers with light green stripes and a collarless, yellowed shirt that plainly itched. He looked European, principally French, in spite of his blue eyes, and was not as scrawny as he initially appeared to be, but was muscular in a nuggety way.

each sinew strapped to its bone as clearly as shoelaces on a shoe. Jesse could smell Mrs. S. A. Allen Zyló Balsamum Hair Dressing (which he too favored) on the boy's ginger brown hair. They were exactly the same height.

"How old are you, kid?"

"Twenty," he said, and then corrected himself. "Except I won't really be twenty until January. He scratched his sleeve apologetically and answered again, "I'm nineteen."

"You *feel* older than that though, don't you?"

Bob acknowledged that he did. A pigeon stirred on a rafter and cocked its head at a man flinging wooden objects into the air.

"You enjoy yourself this evening?" Jesse asked.

"I was strung too high for much pleasure."

Jesse seemed to think that was an appropriate remark and something in the boy's manner of speaking inspired Jesse to ask, "Do you like tea?" And when Bob said he did (though he didn't), Jesse invited him up to the bungalow without saying goodbye to the others. They were then gathered around a clove cake on which orange gumdrops spelled Grampa, part of the loot that Clarence Hite had pilfered on the coach. The younger men sat on the ground around Frank, and Clarence recapitulated some of the robbery's disputes and amusements, emphasizing his valor, fabricating badly, boring both Charley and Frank in such a thoroughgoing way that they beguiled themselves by eating the gumdrops and cake, Frank ripping out large segments that he carefully squeezed into his palm until they were roundly packed, only then popping them into his mouth.

Charley listened to Hite with impatience, almost petulance, a smile tucked like licorice in his mouth, his eyes glazed. When his ear at last learned of a stillness, he awoke and lurched into long and wearying stories about the Fords. He talked about their childhood in Fairfax County, Virginia, in rented rooms in George Washington's Mount Vernon estate. He talked about sailing paper boats on the Potomac River, clambakes on the Atlantic coast, or playing doctor with the late president's great-granddaughters while guests from foreign countries walked the grounds. He talked about the Moor School near Excelsior Springs and about Seybold's Tavern and its sleeping rooms, in which the roughneck and frightening Younger gang retired on more than one occasion while the owner and his nephews, Bob and Charley Ford, looked on with reverence.

He said Bob once shot a milk cow because it kicked him in the shin during chores, that as kids they chased cats with meat cleavers and chopped off their ears and tails, that ten children once swarmed over Bob and almost choked him to death with a grapevine because he so often bullied them, that he and Bob were horse thieves in high school, rustling colts and fillies for Dutch Henry Born, who was arrested in Trinidad, Colorado, by none other than Sheriff Bat Masterson.

Frank James paid attention to the stories but didn't pretend much fascination. Charley said, "Sounds like maybe it's made up, but it's history, top to bottom."

Clarence said, "Funny things happen in Colorado. I once saw a cat eat a pickle."

Frank and Charley regarded him dully and then Frank got together two horse blankets and haggardly walked to an empty stall. "If you two are going to stay up all night, I guess I don't have to stand guard."

Clarence asked, "Do you think the sheriff's out already?"

"Generally is."

Charley worried that he might have thoughtlessly wronged Frank James or done his own cause some damage, so he slunk over to the stall and gawked as the grim man hung his coat and scraped straw into the shape of a pallet. He said, "I wasn't just flapping my lips when I spun out those yarns about my kid brother and me. What I figured was if you and Jesse could gauge our courage and daring, why, you just might make us your regular sidekicks."

Frank jerked a look of umbrage toward Charley and then spread out a wool blanket with his stockinged foot. "You're beginning to sound like Bob."

"I'll be square with you: it was Bob who put me up to it. He's sharper than I am; he's smart as whip. And he's got plans for the James boys that I can't even get the hang of, they're that complicated."

As he settled aching into repose, Frank wrapped a horse blanket over his cardigan sweater and supported his head with his right forearm. He said, "You might as well forget everything about this because there'll be no more monkey business after tonight. You can jot it down in your diary: September seventh, eighteen eighty-one; the James gang robbed one last train at Blue Cut and gave up their nightriding for good."

Charley hung his biceps over the topmost stall board, disappointed and skeptical. "How will you make your living?"

Frank was smoking a cigarette with his eyes shut. "Maybe I'll sell shoes."

JESSE AND BOB were by then at the round dining room table, letting Zee read the green tea leaves in their mugs. A big candle was the only light and the men's rapt faces were vaguely orange in the glow as Zee made the prescribed suggestions. They each up-ended their mugs and clocked them around three times as Zee, with a slight giggle, recited, "Tell me faithful, tell me well, the secrets that the leaves foretell." She then requested that Bob give her his mug and gazed at the green dregs still clinging to the murky bottom. "It looks like a snake."

Bob got up from his chair and gaped with puzzlement as she obligingly tilted the mug. "You mean that squiggle there?"

"They call it a snake. It's a sign of antagonism."

Jesse grinned and slid his own mug across to his wife. "She gets all the fancy talk straight out of *Lorna Doone*."

Zee peered at her husband's cup and said, "Yours is no happier, Dave."

Bob looked interrogatively at a man who was massaging his gums with a finger. "Dave?"

He said, "You know your Good Book? David is the begotten of Jesse." He winked for reasons that Bob couldn't intuit. "You might call it my alias. Give me my sorry prophecy, sweetheart."

Zee gave back the mug. "It looks like an M. It means someone has evil intentions toward you."

Jesse squinted inside and tipped the candle, pattering wax on the oakwood. "That's not exactly today's news, is it."

Zee sighed. "They're lacking in gaiety tonight, aren't they. Maybe I steeped the tea too long." She then arose from the dining room table with fatigue and announced that she'd be knitting in the bedroom if she could keep her eyes uncrossed. Jesse walked to the pantry and picked two Havana cigars from a corked soapstone jar and bade his guest follow him with the candle to the front porch where they could rock and smoke and raise their voices.

The weather had modified into a mild shower, the night sky grumbled in the east, runways glittered in the street, somewhere a rooster crowed. Jesse lowered into a hickory rocker and Bob Fox took the mating chair. Bob saw his trousers drip rainwater as he bent forward over the candle and resettled, blowing cigar smoke in a gush. Jesse had nibbled off the end of his cigar but let the chester lump under his lower lip to induce drowsiness. It was almost one o'clock and he assumed correctly that a posse from Kansas City would have reached Glendale and begun an investigation.

Bob said, "I can't believe I woke up this morning wondering if my daddy would loan me his overcoat, and here it is just past midnight and I've already robbed a railroad and scared the socks off some Easterners and I'm sitting in a rocking chair chatting with none other than Jesse James."

"It's a wonderful world," said Jesse.

Bob's cheeks collapsed when he sucked on the cigar and the button of gray ash absorbed him. "Have you ever heard outlaws call dollar bills 'Williams'? I read that in *Morrison's Sensation Series*. You see, Bill is a nickname for William."

"I see."

"You haven't heard anybody say it though?"

"Can't say so."

"You know what I've got right next to my bed? *The Trainrobbers, or A Story of the James Boys* by R. W. Stevens. Many's the night I've stayed up with my mouth open and my eyes jumping out reading about your escapades in the *Wide Awake Library*."

"They're all lies, you know."

" 'Course they are."

Jesse carved cigar ash off with his thumbnail. "Charley claims you boys once lived in Moulton Vernon."

"Yep. Played in Martha Washington's summerhouse, even made a toy of the iron key to that jail the Bastille? Lafayette gave it to General George Washington and neither one of them ever guessed that Bob Ford would use the dang thing to lock his sisters up in the attic."

Jesse eyed Bob and said, "You don't have to keep smoking that if it's making you bungee."

Bob was relieved. He reached over the bannister and dropped the cigar into a puddle. It wobbled and canoed in the rain. "I was seven when we moved to Excelsior Springs. Everybody was talking about the sixty thousand dollars in greenbacks the James-Younger gang stole in Liberty. My Uncle Will lived close to you, over by Kearney—Bill Ford? Married Artella Cummins?"

"I know him."

"How we did love to go over there for Sunday dinner and spend the afternoon getting the late news about the Jameses."

Jesse searched his pockets and brought forth a cake of camphor that he rubbed over his throat. "You know what he also said? Charley said you once had a shoebox practically filled with James boy mementoes."

Bob submerged his resentment and acrimony behind a misleadingly shy smile. "That must've been a couple of years ago."

"Or maybe it was Bunny who did that."

"You're making sport of me, aren't you?"

Jesse caught Bob's wrist and put a finger to his lips in order to shush the boy, and then inclined out over the porch rail to inspect the composition of the night. He resettled and patiently rocked the chair on its complaining runners and then Bob saw a stooped man with a lunch pail tramping through the rainmuck of the street. He was Charles Dyerr, assistant foreman at the Western Newspaper Union and next-door neighbor to a man known only as J. T. Jackson. Dyerr would much later claim he rarely saw Jackson engage in gainful employment and guessed he was a gambler, just exactly the sort of man that Dyerr held in deepest contempt.

Jesse called out, "Evening, Chas!"

Dyerr glanced to the porch and changed the grip on his lunch pail. "J.T."

"They've got you working late again."

"James gang robbed another train."

"You don't mean it!"

Dyerr apparently felt he'd already spoken at compromising length, for he crossed up into his yard without another word.

Jesse called in his shrill voice, "If they put a posse together get me into it, will ya?"

They heard a woman speak as Dyerr opened the screen door and the man responded, "Just that s

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