

Jesse James, the Outlaw

W. B. Lawson

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Jesse James, the Outlaw

W. B. Lawson

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CHAPTER I. In the Robber's Nest

Bang! Ping; A bullet whistled by my left ear.

Bang! Ping! Thud! Another whistled by my right ear, clipping a lock of hair, and burying itself in the stalk of the heavy blacksnake whip that I was flourishing aloft at the time.

"Curse you! Won't you stop now?" shouted a voice behind me, to which I had thus far given no heed.

"War, yes, stranger," I drawled, reining up, and wheeling my horse imperturbably, "I reckon I will this time, since you insist on it so emphatically."

Three horsemen approached me. They were rather suspicious than angry, and they had just ridden out of the gate of a lonely farmhouse that I had jogged leisurely but observantly by a few minutes before.

I knew them instantly, though, very fortunately, they didn't know me in the disguise, half clerical and half agricultural, that I then wore. They were three daring Chicago detectives in the disguise of horse-traders -- Hawes, Jewell, and Whittaker by name. They were on the lookout for Jesse and Frank James, the noted trainrobbers and bandits, and had just visited old Mrs. James' farmhouse, in the hope of finding the dreaded outlaws there, and worming themselves into their confidence, with a view to their ultimate capture. Ten thousand dollars reward was the stake. I, William Lawson was on precisely the same "lay." I was, however, wholly on my own hook, didn't admire their mode of procedure, and proposed to go about the dangerous job in my own way.

There you have the whole situation in a nutshell.

"Who and what are you, old man?" inquired Hawes, eyeing my curious rig in a half-amused way, as did his companions; "and why didn't you rein up when we first called out to you?"

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"Last question first. I didn't rein up because I'm neither a darky nor a Chinaman, to be ordered about by you or any one else," I replied, with rustic indignation. "And first question last. I am a medical man, of Booneville, on my travels. Now, sir, who in thunder are you? I mean to have the law on you, if there's any in Missouri."

The three detectives burst into a loud laugh.

"Do you know who lives in that house that we've just quitted?" said Hawes, without replying to my question.

"No, I don't; and, moreover, I don't care," said I, still in a huff.

Not the less, however, as I spoke, did I furtively look back at the farmhouse, and notice that the Widow James was peering out of the porch. It pleased me mightily, however, to know that she remarked the altercation we were having in the road.

"Don't be mad," said Hawes, laughing. "Are you riding toward Independence? If you are, we may all take dinner together at the hotel."

I pretended to be reluctantly mollified, and we all four turned our backs on the farmhouse, and walked our horses together down the wild, rocky road. The three detectives talked together, chiefly about horses and horse-trading, as we proceeded. Their object, I saw, was to keep themselves in practice as to the assumption of their fictitious characters by blinding even such—a harmless old lunkhead as I appeared to be.

In fact, their braggadocio in firing their bullets after me as they had done had been in keeping with the same plan. They were anxious to appear in the light of murderers, dare-devil Missourians, at any cost. Nevertheless, I knew them to be really daring men at heart, each one of them an excellent shot, and all conscious of the fact that they were carrying their lives in their hands in the desperate enterprise upon which they had entered.

"I'm sorry we've been unable to see Jess James as yet," said Jewell. "I know he could put us on the track of some good bargains in horseflesh."

"Maybe our pardner, Langman, was in better luck with looking up the James boys," said Whittaker.

"The widow was mighty close-lipped about the boys," said Hawes, whipping up his nag. "I s'pose she's got to be, in view of —"

He suddenly paused, reining up, and half-wheeling his horse.

"Holy smoke!" he exclaimed, altogether thrown off his guard. "Here are Jess and Frank James now, right upon us."

He spoke truly. Two horsemen, followed at a short distance by a third, had followed us noiselessly on the soft, turf-y ground at the side of the rocky road, and were now within a few paces of us.

Hawes' astonished exclamation was a dead "give-away" as to the real character of himself and associates, for they had just pretended at the widow's an entire ignorance as to the James boys' personal appearance.

"Throw up your hands, curse you!" thundered Jesse James, with a terrible oath, covering us with his revolver, as we all came to a startled halt.

His companions did the same, while motioning me to one side, as a person too insignificant to be mixed up in the quarrel.

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"Throw up your hands," echoed Frank James, in an equally unmistakable tone.

Paralyzed with sudden panic, Jewell and Whittaker obeyed at once.

Hawes, however, saw that the game was up, surrender or no surrender. He resolved to die hard, if die he must.

"Not if I know it!" he growled, whipping out his revolver and firing with the rapidity of thought.

His bullet passed through the neck of the James' confederate -- a train-robber, named Curly Pitts -- who thereupon tumbled from the saddle, after firing his own pistol in the air.

At the same instant Hawes fell dead, with Jesse James' bullet in his heart. Then the defenseless Whittaker went down, shot through and through by simultaneous shots from the robber brothers.

Jewell, at this, suddenly wheeled his horse, and took to flight at a tremendous pace. Then I took up my cue, horrified as I was, and began emptying my revolver at his retreating form, while Frank James spurred after him in hot pursuit.

"Who are you?" said Jesse James, eyeing me with a sphinxlike look, that would be either murderous or agreeable, as the case might be.

"I am a doctor of Booneville," said I, "and, if you are the redoubtable Jesse James, I bring you a message from a dying woman -- Blanche Rideau."

He started, seeming to change countenance even under the iron mask of his hardened aspect.

"Dying -- Blanche Rideau!" he muttered. "However, there's no time for softness now. If you're a doctor, see what you can do for my friend Curly yonder. In the meantime, I must examine the effects of these fellows. I suspected them as detectives all the while they were 'talking horse' to my mother, and the single exclamation of one of 'em a moment ago was enough."

I at once dismounted, and began to examine the hurts of the fallen robber. Jesse James, at the same time, turned over the dead bodies of Hawes and Whittaker, his magnificent sorrel horse meantime following him about with the intelligence of a spaniel.

While we were thus engaged, Frank James came galloping back, cursing bitterly because of Jewell's escape.

"Never mind, Frank," said Jesse. "You should have let me go after the cuss on Dancer there, then we'd have bagged the whole gang. Look! A pretty brace of horse-dealers these!"

He held up some documents that he had just rifled from the dead bodies.

"Correspondence with our worst enemies at Kansas City, by Jupiter!" exclaimed Frank, after snatching and scanning one of the papers. "Thank fortune, we've wiped out the whole five of 'em, with the exception of the one hound that escaped!"

"You bet! or will have done so before another hour's passed," said Jesse, exchanging a meaning glance with him. "How's Curly?" he added, turning to me. "Hello! on his feet again?"

"Why, old chap, you're a trump!" said Frank, meaning to compliment me. "I thought Curly Pitts was done for, sure!"

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In the meantime I had succeeded in resuscitating Curly Pitts. He was white and scarcely able to speak, but was even remounting his horse with my assistance.

"No," said I; "the bullet only passed through the muscles and flesh at the back of the neck. I've stanched the flow of blood, but, if the wound can be properly attended to without delay, he will be all right."

"Mother will attend to that," said Jesse James, springing into the saddle. "Come, boys, we can risk an hour's rest at the house before cutting and running on account of this affair. Mister, you'll go with us."

"There's nothing I would like better, Mr. James!" said I, gravely; and I also resumed the saddle.

The way in which I said "Mr. James" caused both brothers to laugh shortly.

So we moved away up the road, leaving the dead men lying where they had fallen, but leading away their horses with us.

Upon reaching the porch of the lonely farmhouse, two silent-looking negro boys came from the direction of the barn. They took our horses as we dismounted.

Then the Widow James, a tall, masculine-looking old woman, with her face expressive of much fearless strength of character, made her appearance. Jesse nodded significantly to her, while motioning me to follow him. As I did so, Frank James supported the wounded Pitts into the house.

Jesse James led me to a little rocky nook behind the barn. The wild forest was on one hand, the barn on the other. Desereted as seemed the spot, I soon became aware that armed men were on the constant lookout at different parts of the farm.

"Now, stranger, for your story," said Jesse James, seating himself on a fragment of rock. "I needn't warn you that it'll be better for you to be truthful to the letter."

"I know that," said I, seating myself, and secretly studying him with devouring curiosity. "A tremor of untruthfulness would mean a bullet in my heart, so you can rely upon exactitude."

He was a man of magnificent proportions, with close clipped, reddish beard, handsome, stern features, and a steely blue eye, whose penetrating glance might have pierced a three-inch plank.

"I am a medical practitioner of Booneville, whither I came from St. Louis less than six months ago," said I.

"Only six months ago?"

"Yes. Let me go on. Notwithstanding my brief practice there, I have already secured the confidence of some of the best families. Among others that of Judge Rideau. His beautiful daughter, Miss Blanche, was a patient of mine. I was also honored with her confidence. Just before she died — "

"Died?" almost shouted the outlaw, springing to his feet, with a terrible alteration of countenance. "You didn't say before that she was dead. You only said she was dying. Oh, great God! Look you, stranger," he added, in a sudden fury. "See to it that you substantiate what you say, or — "

He half-drew one of his revolvers.

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"Just before Blanche Rideau died," said I, imperturbably, "she told me the story of her miserable love. She also made me swear that I would seek you out, Jesse James, even at the cost of my life, and that I would give you this."

I handed him, as I spoke, a small packet, tied with blue ribbon.

He snatched it from me with a sort of groan. Tearing open its contents — apparently some time-yellowed letters and other little things — he turned his back upon me. I heard him breathing hard, and then a half-stifled sound as though he were kissing the packet.

I at that moment had him at such a disadvantage as probably no man ever before had had the dreaded Jesse James. I could easily have shot him dead then and there, and thus have rid the world of perhaps the most successful, murderous and desperate bandit who has ever luridly illuminated the pages of American criminality. But I have never been an assassin, even in dealing with assassins. Moreover, my object was to devise means for the capture of him and his brother alive, and on this I was staking my all.

When he again turned to me, he had thrust the packet of tokens in his bosom, and thoroughly recovered his selfcontrol.

"Stranger, put it there!" said he, extending his hand with real frankness.

I instantly placed my hand in his broad, open palm — though not without an inward shudder — and he gripped it hard.

"Listen to a few words, doctor," said he. "Though married now to a woman whom I have learned to adore, there's no disloyalty to her in my speaking them. Six years ago Blanche Rideau and I were engaged. We loved each other madly. Had the course of that love been uninterrupted, the world would today behold me a reformed man — perhaps, also, a useful citizen, instead of the red scourge that I am, tracked everywhere by the bloody footprints of my career. It was interrupted. I am — what the world has made me."

"It was not Judge Rideau's fault, surely," said I.

"No; it was the fault of his brother, Blanche's uncle — Henry Rideau — a million curses on his head!" growled the outlaw between his clenched teeth. "He was the marplot! 'Twas he that ruined all by reporting my accursed antecedents to Blanche and her old father. He's a rich bank president somewhere up in Minnesota now, but I'll get even with him yet — curse, curse, curse him!"

For a moment his passion was ungovernable. When it had passed, he said, suddenly, in a changed voice:

"Did — did any message accompany the packet, doctor?"

"Yes; she bade me to seek for your reformation — for your return to the paths of virtue — if this is not beyond the bounds of possibility."

The outlaw burst into a frightful laugh.

"Look at me, doctor!" he exclaimed, towering to his full stature, with either hand resting on the butt of a revolver. "Here I stand, Jesse James, the outlaw! All the world's hand is against me, my hand is against all the world in retaliation. Let them send their detectives after me in droves, if they choose. Ay, let them send constables' posses, and even Government troops, if they will. But let them get the drop on me — let them come and take me if they dare!"

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His words were no more desperate and ferocious than his manner, as he spoke. Being a disguised detective myself, I could not refrain from an inward shudder, but I preserved my outward calm.

"With half the country people for your well-wishes, Jess," said I, "you doubtless stand a pretty even chance."

He gave a short laugh.

"Come with me, doe," said he. "In fact, you can't do otherwise now. It's one of our rules never to allow a newcomer to go out of our company, after having once admitted him, until dead sure of his good faith. You shall accompany our band while we remain in this part of the country. You can then judge whether or not there's any likelihood of your reclaiming me even in accordance with the dying prayer of poor Blanche Rideau."

I followed him to the house. When we entered its great, rude, old-fashioned kitchen and dining-room combined, we found a plentiful repast awaiting us, with the Widow James and her two negro servants in attendance. We sat down to it with Frank James, Curly Pitts, and two other men whom Jesse James roughly introduced to me as Charley Miller and Hank Burke.

After dinner, Jesse hurriedly showed me over the house, which I found to be constructed both above and below, very much after the manner of a rude fort.

"We don't often venture to stop here, but, when we do, it's well enough to be prepared," said he, as we returned to the main room. "Come, boys, up and away's the word! There are two dead men out yonder on the road that may yet cause us trouble if we linger."

In a few minutes we were all six in the saddle, and on the move, both Frank and Jesse kissing their mother goodby before mounting.

We did not at once take to the road again, but, gaining a broad forest bridle-path from the rear of the farmhouse, were soon galloping freely through the woods. It was the autumn of the year and magnificent weather.

In about an hour we neared a high road, and here, at a signal from Jesse, we halted in a beautiful little glade, through which a stream of bright water was meandering. Not a word was spoken while we waited. It was easy to see that Jesse James was the natural leader of the wild crew, to whom the most implicit obedience was paid.

Presently a whistle sounded from somewhere away far off in the forest on the opposite side of the road. Jesse James responded to it. Then there came three notes in swift, sharp succession.

"Good!" said Jesse, with a grim look. "They've got their man. I reckon those Chicago detectives, at all events, will give the James boys a wide berth in the future.

Then we saw two young fellows riding across the road toward us. They were rough, farmer-looking lads, but well armed and mounted, and with a certain recklessness of aspect whose significance there was no mistaking. They led a horse, upon whose back was a man with a gag in his mouth, his arms pinioned behind him, and his ankles made fast under the animal's belly.

To my secret horror and commiseration, I recognized in this man, Langman, the fifth Chicago detective, whose cooperation poor Hawes and Whittaker had alluded to but a few minutes preceding their own assassination. Of course, I was not recognized in my turn, and, of course, a sense of selfpreservation now held me speechless and motionless.

"Did you track this one as I ordered, Cutts?" said Jesse, as the new-comers came to a halt in our midst.

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"Not all the way to Independence, but the Lamb here did," said the young man addressed, with a gesture toward his companion.

The latter, as I afterward learned, rejoiced in the appellation of Larry the Lamb.

"I tracked him to the telegraph office in the town, Jess," said the latter. "He sent off two dispatches to Chicago, one to the name you said to be on the lookout for. An hour later we knocked him from his horse, and -- well, here he is, Jess!"

At a gesture from the outlaw leader, Cutts and the Lamb dismounted. They cut the thongs at the prisoner's ankles, took him from his horse, and, in a few minutes, had him bound upright with his back to a tree by the roadside.

In this position the wretch faced the whole party with eyes that were wide and haggard, but in whose hopeless depths, I am happy to say, there seemed not an atom of cowardly fear.

At another gesture from the leader, the horsemen then ranged themselves abreast of the prospective victim, at a distance of about twenty paces.

At another gesture, each man drew his revolver, their trained horses in the meantime standing motionless, with the rigidity of statues.

"Ungag him, Cutts," called out Jesse.

Then, turning to me, he added:

"You can draw back and shut your eyes, if you choose, doe. This ain't no funeral of yours."

I had already drawn back from their deadly, murderous line, but I could not close my eyes. I could not even turn my back on the awful tragedy that was about to be perpetrated. It attracted me with a sort of horrible fascination.

"Got anything to say, Chicago?" called Jesse James, when Cutts had removed the gag and stepped back.

"It would do me no good in the presence of such fiends as you are," said Langman, with the courage of despair. "My blood be on your heads!"

Jesse laughed his remorseless laugh.

"One!" said he, at the same time shooting the victim through the body.

"Two!" said Frank James, who was the next on his left hand, the pistol accompaniment speaking with equal precision.

"Three!" called out the next in the line, putting in his shot.

So they kept on coolly counting and shooting, emptying revolver after revolver, until, incredible as it may seem, one hundred shots had been emptied into the defenseless body, and it hung a limp and bleeding mass, for the observation of whatsoever horrified wayfarers might chance along the broad and sunlit highway.

Then the band began hastily to reload their revolvers, with the exception of Jesse James, who coolly began to scrawl something on a fragment of paper with a lead pencil. This he presently handed to Cutts, with a significant gesture toward the mutilated body on the tree.

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"Yonder's a likely signpost, Cutts," said he. "Label it with this, that all may know what it means."

The piece of paper, with which the young desperado then placarded the gory bosom of the corpse, was rudely inscribed as follows:

LET DETECTIVES TAKE WARNING! The James Brothers

This having been accomplished, the outlaw leader gave the signal' and we all galloped up the road at the top of our speed.

The country grew wilder and wilder through which we passed.

Presently, upon coming to a fork in the road, there was a division made in our number. Cutts and the Lamb rode off in one direction; Pitts, Miller, and Burke in another; while I alone accompanied Jesse and Frank James up into the depths of a gloomy forest by-road, that seemed to lead away into a veritable wilderness.

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CHAPTER II. Pass Out That Treasure Box!

The houses that we passed after entering the gloomy by-road were few and far between, and of an exceptionally lonely and forlorn appearance.

I remarked that with the rough occupants of all of them, so far as there were any signs of life at all, my terrible companions were in signal good-standing.

At last we struck off from even the apology for a road we had been following. A difficult jaunt of ten minutes longer through the scarcely broken forest brought us to a large clearing, in which there was one of the largest and most comfortable-looking cabins I had ever seen.

Among others who came out to meet us were two beautiful, even refined-looking, young women, whom I discovered, to my astonishment, to be the wives of my companions. I was introduced to them and the rest, after a fashion, simply as "doe" Jesse not having thus far seen fit to ask me for any other name.

It was now sunset. I was greatly exhausted in body, mind, and nerve, especially the latter. It was, therefore, not long after the ample supper with which we were regaled that I was glad enough to accept the bed that was offered me in a little room in the back of the house.

I slept soundly, but nevertheless awoke several times during the night. Whenever I did so I became intuitively conscious that I was watched. Of course, I could not conjecture by whom, and the sense itself was an indefinable one at best. But it was, nevertheless, strong, and I knew instinctively just as well as if I had been told so in as many words that any attempt just then to escape from my terrible environment would inevitably result in my violent death.

"Don't worry, sis. Just wait till I make one more big tenstrike, either on a passenger train or with a rich bank, that's all. Then hey for the Panhandle of Texas, and for peace and quiet with my darling. Run into the house now, and I will soon join you."

Such were the words I overheard spoken in the garden just outside of my window when I awoke for the last time, and in broad daylight. The voice was that of Jesse James, and the words were finished by a sound very like a kiss,

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which I doubted not was bestowed on the lips of a wifely listener. I heard a happy little laugh a moment afterward, followed by a sharp rustle, as of a woman's skirts being whisked into the house, and then the receding footsteps of a man.

Wonderingly thinking of many things, I arose, dressed, and went in search of Jesse, whose protege I was generally thought to be.

As I passed through the rooms on my way to the open air, hardly any one paid the slightest attention to me, except Frank James, who looked up and nodded surlily as I passed him in the kitchen.

It appeared to be a cleanly, well-ordered household, but an air of suspicious sadness — a sense of isolation — an unmistakable consciousness of criminality — overhung it like a pall. It was as though the house was a man, with the indelible brand of Cain upon its brow.

"Good-morning, Mr. James," said I, as I came upon the outlaw leader, somewhat unawares, in a little nook at the farther side of the clearing.

He stared up confusedly, and hastily hid in his bosom something that he had been earnestly contemplating — perhaps the packet of tokens I had given him on the preceding day. He was himself again in a moment, however. After exchanging a few remarks, he said:

"Doe, I believe I can trust you."

"I know you can," said I.

"How would you like to go into Independence to-day, to find out for me the drift of public thought concerning Frank and me?"

"Just as you say," said I. "You know the solemn obligation that I feel in being here with you."

"Yes, yes; but will you promise to come back here — alone — say at this time to-morrow morning, and report?"

"Solemnly."

"All right, I believe you. Go ahead, then, as soon as you've got your breakfast. By the way, to-day is the last of the big county fair. I may meet you either on or near the grounds this afternoon, if you happen to be on hand."

"What, openly?"

"I never went disguised in my life," said Jesse, coolly.

"But, good Heavens! you wouldn't take such a risk?"

"Yes, I would, by —! and a thundering sight bigger one, for a sufficient stake, and with this at hand!" he exclaimed, clapping his hand on one of his revolvers. "Pshaw, man! my reputation alone carries me through more than half my adventures. Come; there's the breakfast-bell."

Directly after breakfast I mounted and rode away. But little attention was paid to me as I quitted the house. A boy piloted me to the road, and then an hour's gallop brought me in sight of Independence.

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But during that hour's ride enough bewildering thoughts occurred to me to make my head whirl. For months I had been praying for just this sort of intimacy with the dreaded James brothers, and now that I had achieved it, I was half appalled at the risk upon which I had entered.

But half of my Booneville story was true, although the lovetokens from the dying Blanche Rideau were genuine. I had never practiced as a physician, but had received the letters and other little things from Judge Rideau himself, soon after his daughter's death. He was a friend of mine, and gave the things to me in the furtherance of my plans, and in the honest hope that they would aid me in bringing these desperate criminals to justice.

Here I was in their confidence at last. But, should they discover my duplicity in this respect, or obtain the first inkling of a suspicion that I was in correspondence with the authorities -- well, from the cruelly murderous scenes that I had already witnessed where detectives were concerned, the reader can judge whether or not I could have any hopes of retaining my own life for a single instant. I was literally carrying my life in my hands. However, I had placed my life upon a die, and there was nothing for it but to stand the hazard of the cast.

I found the town of Independence in a great state of excitement over the previous day's doings of the James brothers.

The first person I met to recognize me was Jewell, the sole remaining Chicago detective. It was on a sidestreet, soon after I put up my horse at the hotel.

He was still shaky from his escape of the preceding day. As soon as he saw me he shrank up against a fence, his eyes starting out of his head, as though he were beholding a ghost.

"Great guns, stranger! you here and alive?" he ejaculated.

"It looks like it," I replied.

"But how did those James devils come to let you off?"

"Am I a detective?"

"But think of Hawes and Whittaker! And it was only last evening that Langman's riddled body was found fastened to the tree."

"What of that?"

"Why, I should think they would have murdered you, too."

"Not at all. They had nothing against an inoffensive, old, country doctor like me. They merely kept me a prisoner all day and night, and then dismissed me -- with a caution. It's a caution I'm not likely to forget."

"Good Lord, I should think not."

"What is to be your next move?" I asked.

"Holy smoke, can you ask? Why, to quit Independence and Missouri as soon as I can muster up the nerve to do so!"

"Nerve? Muster up nerve merely to take passage out of a locality!"

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"That's it, stranger. Blast me, if I ain't even afraid to get aboard a railroad train, lest the James boys should gobble me up on the way, locomotive, cowcatcher, and all. I've a wife and three young ones in Chicago -- only let me get back there again, without a hide full of bullets, that's all."

And with that the decidedly demoralized detective meandered off, looking this way and that, as if he dreaded to see a James brother sprout out of every gate post.

I spent the morning in picking up such items of information as I thought would be likely to interest Jesse James when I should meet him again on the following day, in accordance with my promise. I determined to consider myself as being on parole for the time being.

In the course of my sauntering I observed both Cutts and Larry the Lamb in the crowds thronging the streets incidental to the great fair. I pretended to have no knowledge of their whereabouts, though morally sure that one of their chief objects was to spy upon my movements. Doubtless there were other confederates of the outlaws scattered through the crowds for a similar purpose. However, their presence did not make me lose confidence in myself.

Toward noon, hot and thirsty, I strolled into one of the temporary saloons on the fair grounds, and ordered a lemonade. Two sorry negro minstrels were apparently trying to be comical, in the hope of--a few gratuitous quarters, at the rear of the saloon, with a battered banjo and a pair of bones as the accessories. While I was sipping my lemonade at a small table near them, the fellow with the bones began a series of antics around me, and wound up by significantly extending his open palm.

"Not much," I exclaimed, with a countryman's indignation. "I wouldn't pay a cent for your ridiculous monkey shines -- not one cent, sir. Better wash the black off your face and enter upon some honest occupation."

"Gimme a drink, at all events, old hoss," pleaded the mountebank, kicking up another antic or two, while bawling out the fag-end of a cheap ballad at the top of his voice.

Finally, after a good deal of chaffing, I reluctantly allowed him to persuade me to order him a glass of beer. A crowd of loafers and sightseers had in the meantime gathered in the saloon. They stood near the bar, and were doubtless greatly amused at the altercation for the paltry price of a drink between Bones and the stingy old countryman, as they considered me.

Nevertheless, as Bones blew the froth from his beer, and bowed his thanks to me, with a squirming contortion of the body that set the crowd in a roar, he eyed me with a flashing look of intelligence. I recognized him for my man just the same.

"What about the Youngers?" I whispered, over my lemonade.

"They are to have a conference with the Jameses at the end of next week, to plan a colossal train or bank robbery," was the swift reply over the beer. "And you, colonel?

"I am now fairly living with the James boys, and rapidly learning all their plans," was my rejoinder. "Will try and talk with you again to-night. Quick! do something. I'm being watched."

At this juncture Bones "downed" the beer at a gulp, spun the glass in the air and caught it again, shouted out the first lines of a song, and, dashing into the contortions of an original breakdown, wound up by waving one foot in the air and bringing it down on the top of my new hat with crushing and disastrous effect.

Jesse James, the Outlaw

Red and excited, I arose— with a roar of simulated rage, and was about to precipitate myself upon him, when the barkeeper interfered. He said I mustn't hurt the musicians, and smilingly advised me to take— myself and my custom in the neighborhood of cheaper refreshments.

With that I indignantly quitted the saloon, amid the jeering laughter of the bystanders, among whom I recognized both Cutts and the Lamb, apparently as jovial at my expense as any of the rest. But, nevertheless, my temper was in reality unruffled, and I had exchanged the necessary information with my confederate just the same.

After dinner at the hotel, I went, with pretty much all the rest of the world, residents and strangers, into the fair grounds. The exhibition of stock and agricultural implements, and flowers and fruits, and the like, was good enough in its way, but I soon wearied of it. Moreover, the crowd in the inclosed ground was wellnigh suffocating.

While wandering curiously about, wondering what Jesse James could have meant by saying that I might see him at the fair, I again ran across Jewell. He had drank so much whisky — he would probably have called it "mustering up nerve" — as to have somewhat overcome his apprehensions, and informed me that he would leave Independence on the seven o'clock train of that evening. He was also full of talk about the success of the fair.

"They've taken in twenty-four thousand dollars in three days, sir," he mauldered. "There goes Sheriff Masters and he told me so. They've just counted out the amount in the gate-office, there it all stands in a tin box at the elbow of the treasurer of the fair association. Let's take a drink, stranger. By Jove! if I had that much money in Chicago — far, far from the murdering James devils — "

Just here I managed to make my escape. I nodded to Masters, with whom I was personally and professionally acquainted, as he passed me a few moments later.

At about four o'clock, when the crowded entertainment was at its height, I grew so tired of the whole thing that I passed out of the inclosure. The surrounding open space, which was just on the outskirts of the town, was almost wholly deserted, in view of the attractions afforded by the inclosed grounds.

As I passed the rough-board ticket-office, I looked through the small, square window at which tickets had been dispensed so profitably for several days. I saw the treasurer — a large, fine-looking gentleman, with a magnificent beard — sitting on a high stool, and facing the window. He was smoking a cigar, with the tin moneybox at his elbow, and was apparently in a very contented state of mind.

I made these observations without any particular object, and then began leisurely crossing the deserted grounds, going toward the town.

The sound of hoof-beats in the roadway behind caused me to turn.

To my utter astonishment, I saw Jesse and Frank James riding in from the direction of the open country at a careless, easy gait. —They were both superbly mounted, as was their custom, Jesse being on his sorrel favorite, Dancer.

Before I could recover from my astonishment they had halted before the ticket-office. There Frank took Dancer by the bridle, while Jesse leisurely dismounted, and approached the office window.

I actually thought the treasurer must be an old personal acquaintance, with whom he was about to pass the time of day in a pure spirit of braggadocio.

Here is what really happened.

Jesse James, the Outlaw

"I say, Mr. Treasurer," said Jesse, urbanely, thrusting his face into the opening, "what'd you think if I should say that I am Jesse James, the outlaw and order you to pass me out that tin money-box yonder?"

"What would I think, eh?" exclaimed the treasurer, bursting into a laugh, and doubtless deeming he was dealing with a lunatic, or a practical joker. "Why, I should think you a -- fool, and would tell you to go to the devil!"

"Well, that's just what I do say, and order you to do," cried Jesse, thrusting his revolver through the opening, and inconveniently getting "the drop" on the astounded official. "Hand out that box -- quick, or you're a dead man!"**

"But look here -- hold on -- this money, d'ye see -- "

"Out with it!" roared the robber, with a frightful oath. "Delay but another instant, and my bullet's in your heart!"

The panic-stricken treasurer handed out the box. But an instant was required to transfer its precious contents into the inside of Dancer's capacious saddlebags.

A moment more and the empty tin box was on the ground, while the successful bandit brothers were galloping away with their booty at a tremendous pace.

It all happened almost directly under my eyes, and was an accomplished fact almost before I realized what had occurred.

The alarm was instantly given. In less than five minutes after the perpetration of the deed, upward of fifty horsemen were galloping in pursuit of the robbers.

Anxious to witness the result, I hastily procured a horse, and joined a small group of excellently equipped pursuers, headed by Sheriff Dick Masters, a brave and capable official.

In gaining the thickly wooded, hilly country, we chose the worst road to be found. It led tortuously in and out of the defiles caused by the blending of the foothills and bold, rocky spurs.

While our party were threading one of these defiles at a breakneck gait, a shout from far above our heads caused us to draw rein and look up.

There, up and away, where the wild road bordered the edge of a frightful chasm, we beheld the daring fugitives skimming away on their fleet steeds, like a pair of eagles, along the face of the cliff.

"Good-by, Dick Masters," called out the younger but abler villain, waving his hat triumphantly. "Score down one more red mark for Jesse James, the outlaw!"

[Back]*An actual fact, without any exaggeration whatsoever.

Jesse James, the Outlaw

CHAPTER III. Jesse James' Mystery

In accordance with my promise to Jesse, the outlaw, I sought the wild, hill-folded, forest-muffled retreat of the James brothers at an early hour of the following morning.

Jesse James, the Outlaw

The retreat was a secure one. Admirably mounted as I was, and with a good memory for landmarks, I could never, unaided, have penetrated to the log farmhouse. The same lad who had guided me to the road on the previous day was in waiting to help me to retrace my steps.

Up to that point I had found the rocky road and bridlepaths thoroughly but imperceptibly sentineled. No wonder that the outlaws felt secure, in spite of the boldness of their depredations. Every scattered farmhouse, every herder's hut, every woodcutter's cabin, contained a friend or a spy in their nefarious cause. A hostile party, or even a single suspicious-looking stranger, could not have come within half a mile of the loghouse without its occupants receiving timely warning of the approach.

Two voices, a man's and a woman's, were heard in angry altercation as I neared the porch. No one was as yet visible. But as I dismounted and threw my bridlerein to my guide, the door opened. Jesse James and his wife came out of it.

He nodded to me in a careless way, while the woman honored me with a swift, venomous look. It was almost the first she had ever deigned to cast on me at all.

They were watchful and composed instantly, but I knew that they had been quarreling. Just as instinctively did I ascribe the cause to the dead girl's mementos which I had placed in the outlaw's keeping on the previous day.

"Morning, doc! You're true to your word," said Jesse, advancing. "It's an hour to breakfast. Come up on the mountain with me."

We moved away, paying no attention to his wife. But I momentarily observed that her fine eyes contracted, like those of a cat, as they briefly followed our movements.

"By the way, doe," said Jesse, when we came to a pause in a lonely spot, "what's the last name you go by? I haven't thought it worth while to ask you before now."

"I go by my own name, and none other, of course," said I, gravely. "It's Phillips."

"Phillips, eh? Dr. Phillips? Dr. Phillips, of Booneville? Good!"

"I'm glad you like it," said I, feeling secretly ill at ease.

"Like it? To be sure I do. Why not? Well, doe, I want to talk with you, perhaps for the last time, about -- Blanche Rideau." And he eyed me like a hawk. "How much of her past history did she impart to her father and you on her deathbed?"

"Everything."

"I mean of her history be -- before she met me?"

"Everything."

"About her schoolgirl's marriage with Tom Younger?"

"Yes."

"About her child -- the boy that Tom stole away from her?"

Jesse James, the Outlaw

"Yes."

He drew a long breath, and remained moodily silent for several minutes.

"You're deeper into that chapter of my past than I thought for, it seems," said he, at last.

"I trust that it will prove only for your good, Jess," said I.

"It had better not prove for anything else, old boy," he went on, with an ugly look, while his hand fell upon the butt of one of his revolvers. "So you know how Tom Younger married Blanche when she was at boarding-school at St. Joe?"

"Yes."

"How it was all kept dark from her relatives -- even the birth of her child at the cabin of the old regress who had been her nurse?"

"Yes."

"How she got to hate Tom on discovering him to be a robber belonging to my band?"

"Yes."

"How she then deserted him and returned home to Booneville, carrying child and nurse with her, without her folks suspecting it?"

"Yes."

"How Tom stole away the boy, and then deputed me to negotiate with her for the boy's restoration, on condition of her acknowledging her relationship and living openly?"

"Yes."

"How Tom Younger was killed by the Kansas City officers while the negotiations were pending, and I thereupon made love to Blanche on my own account, and successfully?"

"Yes."

"How we were about to be married, and I was about to restore the boy to her, when her uncle found me out hounded me forth, and she was forced to give me up?"

"Yes."

"And how after that I kept the boy hidden, in revenge?"

"She told us all."

"The ---- she did!" exclaimed the outlaw, and, drawing another long breath, he began to pace the ground angrily.

Presently he came to an abrupt pause before me, with his eye suspiciously seeking mine.

Jesse James, the Outlaw

"Confess," said he, "that you're here as Judge Rideau's agent, to try to recover Blanche's child from me."

"I acknowledge freely that that is one of the minor objects of my mission, Jess," I replied, having prepared for the query before it was put. "My chief object is in fulfillment of Blanche's dying injunction with regard to yourself, as I told you before -- as the tokens must have proved to you, I should think."

"True."

"As for the rest, I have simply promised to plead with you for the boy's surrender to him, for the boy's own good, in case I should ever find you in a repentant and remorseful mood."

"Ha, ha, ha! Repentant and remorseful, as applied to me, is good! You saw something of that sort of application yesterday and the day before. You'll have a chance of assuring yourself yet more fully in that regard, for you shan't quit my sight again while I'm in this corner of the country."

"I don't care if I shall not," said I. "Personally, I don't dislike you. I admire your boldness and decision of character, in spite of your crimes."

"Good enough! But I'd rather be feared than liked. However, you'll never find out anything about the boy. I'll keep him to spite the Rideaus, with one of whom, the Minnesota bank president, I've got a sterner account to settle. Come on. There's the breakfast-bell. After that you shall accompany me to the Red Hollow."

When we were half way back to the house he paused again.

"Hark ye, doe," said he. "If my wife should manage to question you on the sly, not a word!"

"Not a syllable."

"She knows you brought me those tokens, and she's got an inkling or two about the boy. She'll be glad to know more than she does."

"Which she never will from me. Trust me for that."

Before we entered the house it occurred to me to refer admiringly to the daring robbery of the afternoon before, and to express some wonder that he had not even alluded to it.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the outlaw. "It was cleverly done, wasn't it? And there was a trifle over twenty thousand dollars in that tin box that Frank and I so quickly emptied. Two or three more hauls like that and we're off for the Texas Panhandle for a long rest. But wait and see, wait and see. Big things are ahead."

I had a tremendous appetite for the hearty breakfast to which we were called. While I was yet topping it off, Jesse and Frank James went out to the stable to prepare for our ride. The rest of the household had also hustled out of the room, with the exception of Jesse's wife. She remained sipping her coffee directly across the table from me, and negligently aware of what a trim, pretty little creature she was.

Directly that we were alone together, however, she flashed a swift, intelligent glance upon me.

"You are looking for Tip Younger, the little boy that Jess keeps somewhere concealed," said she, in a low, eager voice. "If I can help you to find and run off the child I'll do it."

I was too wary to trust a woman calling Jesse James husband to the extent of a row of pins.

Jesse James, the Outlaw

"Madam," said I, quite stiffly, "whatever may be my business, it shall be transacted strictly and solely with your husband."

"Ah, I see. You don't dare to trust me. But I'd give anything if he had that other woman's child off his mind. I hated her, and I'm glad she's dead."

I contented myself with bowing and looking shocked

"Jess will be back in another minute -- listen!" she continued, hurriedly. "You may fall under his suspicion at any instant -- to do so is death. But even then, if you should give me a sign that you have found the little Tip and can take him away from Jess, I will help you to escape. Look -- I mean a sign something like this."

She pouted her lips and elevated her eyebrows in a peculiar manner as she finished speaking.

I only stared and burst into a short laugh.

A few minutes later I was in the saddle at her husband's side. While Frank James was riding slightly ahead I told Jesse what his wife had said, with the single reservation of her offer to assist me in case of trouble. I carefully kept that to myself, in view of possibly benefiting thereby at some time or other.

The outlaw burst into a laugh.

"Molly has never forgiven my having loved poor Blanche first," said he. "She's awfully jealous of my secreting the little Tip, whom she has never even laid eyes on. She'd give her best finger to have the boy lost to me. But that shall never be."

Then, after a brief silence, he suddenly gave me a meaning look.

"I say, doe," said he, "if the old judge is so anxious to secure Blanche's boy, money might talk. You understand. But anything short of a cool ten thousand wouldn't be listened to."

"I never heard him mention money in connection with the boy," I replied, briefly, and we quickened our pace.

The truth was this: The recovery of the mysteriously secreted boy, at that time about five years old, was one of the objects of my perilous mission among these desperadoes, only second to the arrest of the James brothers themselves.

Judge Rideau was too shrewd to have directly offered Jesse the heavy reward which was waiting in his hands for me, in case I should succeed in spiriting away the child. The unscrupulousness of the outlaw had been too often made patent, and there would have been too much likelihood of his hanging on to his secret in the hope of a second, or even third, reward, after one had been agreed upon, and paid over.

The James boys' success in robbery had made them avaricious, as well as bold. So the matter stood.

Red Hollow was a wild, wooded nook in the hills, obtaining its name from the redness of the wind-worn, rain-gullied earth-banks interspersing its screen of rugged trees. It was considerably off the main road, and perhaps midway between Independence and Kansas City.

Observable at a distance through the trees was a large, dilapidated, old farmhouse, situated in the midst of partly cultivated grounds, with the unbroken forest at its back.

Jesse James, the Outlaw

This place I had seen and taken note of before. It was the home of the Younger brothers, Cole, John and Bob, the most daring and efficient coadjutors of the James brothers, and scarcely less desperate and venturesome than they.

Halting by a brook that ran through the hollow, Jesse sounded his whistle as the gathering signal.

It was speedily responded to. Men, armed to the teeth, came riding into the place of rendezvous from different directions, singly, in pairs, and in larger groups.

Hither came Cole, John and Bob Younger, splendidly mounted, bold and reckless-looking men, who hailed and saluted the Jameses with a free-and-easy familiarity that argued but little recognition of the latter as leaders. From another quarter appeared Jim Cummings, Jesse's terrible lieutenant, and generally thought to be even more deadly and bloodthirsty than he. He was accompanied by Dick Little and George Sheppard, the latter with but one eye, and having only recently rejoined the gang, after having once severed his connection with it.

Sheppard and I exchanged a swift glance of intelligence. He recognized me underneath my disguise, and I knew him to be at that moment in the service of Sheriff Masters. He had lost his left eye in the raid on the Kentucky bank, but was still a dead shot with the remaining optic.

He had served a term of imprisonment for his share in that robbery, and had ever since believed that Jesse James had purposely thrown him into the clutches of the law, for the purpose of throwing off the scent from his own tracks. Sheppard was also of the opinion that Jesse James had subsequently murdered his, Sheppard's nephew, Harry Sheppard, to obtain Harry's five-thousand-dollar share of the Kentucky spoils. At all events I was so sure of George Sheppard's real motives in rejoining the robbers as to experience no uneasiness as to his having penetrated my identity.

Among the others who poured into the hollow in obedience to the leader's signal I recognized a number from the personal descriptions that I had taken care to photograph upon my mind. Among these were Wood, and Jeff Hite and Ed Miller. The latter was no relation to the Charly Miller already alluded to, whom was likewise present again, together with his comrades of the day before, Hank Burke and Curly Pitts, the latter with his neck still bandaged from the effects of the Chicago detective's bullet.

These veterans in crime were accompanied by several beardless youths, farmers' misguided sons, emulous of iniquitous notoriety, who were posted as sentinels around the skirts of the hollow.

Altogether, there were mustered into the hollow a score or more of wild and lawless men, such as perhaps, had never before been associated together in the United States outside of California in its worst days.

"Boys," called out Jesse James, after a number of criminal plans for the future had been discussed, without arriving at any definite conclusion, "you've all heard by this time of Frank's exploit and mine at the fair grounds yesterday afternoon."

A united cry of approval was the response.

"Well, boys, we raked in a trifle over twenty thousand by that dash," continued the outlaw leader. "And I'll tell you what we're going to do. The whole swag, of course, belongs to Frank and me individually, but we're going to divide half of it among the crowd in the usual apportionment."

I could not but smile at the increased enthusiasm that greeted this apparently spontaneous and generous offer, so really calculating and eelfish at foundation, inasmuch as it merely redoubled the devotion of the crew in the furtherance of other and more dangerous undertakings.

Jesse James, the Outlaw

Then Jesse and Frank James made a division of the ten thousand dollars they had brought with them, as being, at a rough estimate, one-half the amount of which they had plundered the treasurer of the fair association. This operation consumed considerable time, but naturally caused the most intense satisfaction while it was in progress.

"Boys," said Jesse James, at last, "I've been running over in my mind those two projects proposed by Wood Hite and Charley Miller, and have concluded that we can take 'em up at our leisure, and in regular order."

He then went on to discuss the projects in question. They were briefly these: Wood Hite's plan was to stop and rob the express and passenger train from the East, in the Blue Cut, a deep and dangerous railroad cutting two and a half miles out of Independence. It was proposed to do this toward the end of the month we were then in, when assurance should be received of an unusually heavy shipment of treasure by express, which it was known would be along the road somewhere about that time.

Charley Miller was a fugitive of justice from Minnesota, having been a horse thief in that State before joining the band of Jesse, the outlaw. His scheme was to make a daytime raid in large force into the populous town of Northfield, his native place, and empty the safes of the national bank there at the point of the revolver. This would be a repetition of the manner in which the James brothers and their confederates had robbed a wealthy national bank in the interior of Kentucky several years before. Miller argued that a similar job could be effected with equal success in Minnesota, and the plunder got away with before the inhabitants could recover from the panic and demoralization incidental to the unexpectedness of the attack.

It was now decided to put this undertaking on foot directly after the proposed robbery of the express train in the Blue Cut should have been effected.

One circumstance tended especially to Jesse's greedily taking to the Minnesota scheme. The president of the bank at Northfield was none other than Blanche Rideau's uncle, Henry Rideau, who had been mainly instrumental in separating him from his first love, and against whom he had sworn implacable revenge.

Night was falling while these schemes were being discussed in much greater detail than I have seen fit to accord to them.

Suddenly a young fellow, whom I then saw for the first time, spurred unceremoniously into the hollow. His eyes were ablaze with excitement, while his horse was hardblown.

Jesse James, the Outlaw

CHAPTER IV. A Train Robbery

"What's up, Bulger?" demanded the outlaw leader.

"The best chance you've had for a coon's age, Jess, and right at hand!" panted the youth. "Just got wind of it from my brother, who is the railroad telegraph operator at Winston."

"Yes, yes; out with it!"

"A train with but one passenger car will be at Winston in an hour. Rest of the cars met with an accident in the Gap three hours ago. Express messenger on train with a big pile John's sure of it. Passengers, few, and for the most part women."

An anxious hush suddenly fell on the majority of the band, while the James brothers looked at each other,

Jesse James, the Outlaw

exchanging calculating glances.

There were few, even in that desperate band, so cold and hardened in vice as they. Among most of them the first proposition to fresh crime had still its chilling effect.

"What are you hesitatin' for, Jess?" suddenly shouted Jim Cummings, with an oath. "Of course, you're goin' for the job, it'll get our hands in for the bigger 'un at the end of the month."

"Of course, we are!" cried Jess, with a voice like a steel bell. "I was only calculatin' the general arrangement. Masks in readiness! Bustle 'em out, Jim! Frank, you look after the greenhorns and strangers."

I found a moment later, as we began to move out of the hollow two and two, that the last word applied to George Sheppard and me. We were placed in line among the country boys. Dick Little, however, rode directly behind us, with, I felt, a watchful eye on our every movement.

We were soon on the high road, and a sharp gallop of four miles brought us in the neighborhood of Winston station.

Here we halted by the railroad track at the edge of a wood. At the order of Jesse James, the entire band, with the exception of myself, then put on masks, which they had in readiness, the masks being made of several thicknesses of stiff cotton, with holes cut for the eyes and mouth. We at first closed ranks, and there was a silent review of our number and efficiency by the outlaw leader. Then the country boys, with Sheppard and me among them, were stationed on either side of the track, while the rest of the gang began to pile up stones between the rails.

We were ordered to make a great noise as soon as the train should be brought to a standstill, and to fire eighteen or twenty shots, but not to shoot any one unless compelled to, and not to use up all our ammunition.

"You needn't do anything but look on, doe," said Jesse to me, while making his last round of inspection. "I'm sorry to have mixed you up in this thing, but there was no help for it."

Then I heard him say to Sheppard:

"Strep, an old hand like you must feel mean at being put to one side here among the greenies, but you know you are still on your second probation with the gang."

Sheppard made some sort of an accommodating reply, and just then the rumble and roar of the approaching train was heard in the distance.

Jesse James and his veterans had before this dismounted, while we at the side of the track remained still in the saddle. Jesse now stood in the center of the track, bearing in his hand a red lantern, which one of the Youngers had obtained at their farmhouse. He waved it three times over his head as the train approached, and it came to a stop within a dozen feet of the stone heap on which he was standing.

"Off that engine or you're a dead man!" shouted Jim Cummings and Cole Younger, springing toward the engineer and fireman, who were peering out from the side of the locomotive.

With the pistols covering them, they obeyed in an instant.

"Oh, Lord!— It isn't Jess James' gang, is it?" exclaimed the engineer, with his knees knocking together.

"You can bet on that, old man!" said Jess, springing past him, followed by his crime-trained comrades.

Jesse James, the Outlaw

In another instant the conductor and the two brakemen were in the hands of the desperadoes, with pistols at their heads, while Jesse and Frank James battered in the door of the express car and ordered the messenger to come out of it on pain of instant death.

The latter was not disposed to surrender his charge without a show of fight, and drew his revolver. But two or three bullets that were sent singing by his ears brought him to terms. The next moment his revolver was snatched from him, and he was in the car, tremblingly opening the receptacle of his treasures, with the revolvers of the James boys nudging him in the back of the head, and the gleam of the red lantern flashing in his face.

In the meantime my immediate companions, agreeable to their instructions, were banging away with their firearms, at a great rate, and cursing and shouting under the windows of the passenger car at the top of their lungs.

While this was going on the rest of the gang, headed by John and Bob Younger, were going through the crowded passenger car, pistol in hand.

All was dark outside, but I could see plainly into the lighted car, and note the confusion and terror that were taking place. It was such a scene as, under other circumstances, would have had its ludicrous features, the men groaning and throwing up their hands under the menacing muzzles of the revolvers, the women screaming and grasping their wraps, and the young fellows outside shooting and swearing until you would have thought the foul fiend and all his imps had suddenly broken from their confines to make a pandemonium on earth.

In less than ten minutes, however, the entire robbery had been effected.

Jesse James and his comrades jumped off the train, and the conductor and engineer were ordered to "move along."

This they did in a hurry, after a few minutes spent in clearing the track of the obstructions.

"How did the passengers pan out, Bob?" called out Jesse, as he hastily remounted, after stuffing his saddlebags with something that Frank and he were carrying.

"Poor enough, Jess," was Bob Younger's response. "There wasn't more'n a dozen men in the car, and I didn't feel like makin' the women shell out."

"Good enough," said Jesse. "We've never yet been so hard up as to rob the dear creatures. Boys," he added, turning to the band, who were now grouped around him, "of course, I can't tell yet how much we've skinned the express company out of. You'll trust Frank and me to count it, ready for a division, won't you?"

"Yes, yes. Take your time," answered a dozen voices.

"Meet us at our mother's house a week from to-day then, and the division shall be made," said Jesse. "That will be safest, because they'll never think of looking for us there. But be sure to come straggling up singly throughout the entire day. Break up now. It's every man for himself till a week from to-day."

The dispersion was effected quickly and quietly.

Only Jesse and Frank James, George Sheppard, Cole Younger and I remained together. In a few minutes we had regained the high road, galloped along it a considerable distance, turned off into a narrow, rocky path leading through the woods, and were making our way rapidly through the wild region in the direction of the log farmhouse.

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We did not venture to return thither that night, however, as neither Jesse nor Frank deemed it would be safe. My companions seemed perfectly familiar with every foot of the way. We had nothing but the light of the stars to guide us, but they shaped their course across the country without a stumble, and as unerringly as if they were proceeding in broad daylight.

We presently came to a deserted hut in a grassy glade of the forest. Here it was announced we should tarry for the night. We dismounted, turning our horses loose upon the grass, and the Jameses and Younger entered the hut, while Sheppard and I were told to gather up fagots for a fire.

"I say," whispered Sheppard to me, when we were thus engaged in the woods for a few minutes later, "you're also on the lookout for the little boy that Jess is said to keep hidden away, ain't you?"

"Yes," I replied, in the same tone.

"Well, if you ever find him at all, it'll be somewhere's about the Younger homestead. Them precious twins is only kept there, instead of bein' sent to school, as a sort of cover for the more vallyble young one you're lookin' for. Hush! Don't reply."

I fortunately heeded the injunction. At that moment there was heard a stealthy tread behind us. I was not surprised, upon turning my head, to perceive that Jesse James had followed us, and that his eyes were regarding us like those of a beast of prey through the darkness.

When Sheppard had carried into the cabin the fuel we had jointly collected, the outlaw laid a not unkind hand upon my arm and detained me.

"What do you think of my chances for reformation by this time?" said he.

"They're certainly not brilliant, Jess," was my reply.

"Let me tell you something to reinforce from the past what you've already seen," said he. "I, as a mere boy, belonged to Quantrell's guerrilla force during the war, as you must have heard. It wasn't a hundred miles from this spot that a large detachment of us, under Bill Anderson, captured a railway train, containing two hundred invalid soldiers on their way to St. Louis for hospital treatment. Bill Anderson shot them all through the heart with his own hand, one after the other, I aligning them up before him, and his men supplying him with a fresh revolver as fast as he emptied the one in his hand. This is gospel truth. What do you think of it?"

"I've heard of it before," said I, with an inward shudder.

"He had hardly finished with the sick men," he continued, "before a detachment of a hundred blue-coats came in sight over the hill. They surrendered—to our superior force, and all shared the fate of the invalids."**

"I have heard of that before, also."

"Judge, then, if there can be any reformation, any redemption, for such as me!" said the outlaw. "Judge if it is possible, even upon the dying injunction of the first woman I ever loved. However," he added, with his short, hard laugh, "you've got to stay with us now till we quit the country. There's no help for it."

A bright fire had been lighted in the fireplace of the hut when we entered it, and the other men were engaged in frying some bacon, which they had obtained from a small cupboard. In fact, there were many other evidences of the hut being frequently used for the purpose of temporary hiding, to which it was now being put.

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We ate heartily, slept all night on the floor with one or other of the chief trio constantly on guard on the outside, and at an early hour on the following morning took up our journey again, with our steeds even more refreshed than we.

Jesse James' horse, Dancer, however, sustained a sprain by stumbling into a gully soon after we had started, and this put his rider in a very bad humor.

As we came in view of the log farmhouse we saw a single horseman awaiting us by the porch. Jesse directed Sheppard and me to follow more leisurely, and then he and his companions galloped on ahead.

They had all dismounted, and were apparently talking carelessly together, with Jesse's and Frank's wives standing in the porch, when Sheppard and I rode up, and likewise dismounted.

My feet had no sooner touched the ground, however, than the four men, Jesse and Frank James, Cole Younger and the newcomer, who was the callow desperado, Cutts, precipitated themselves upon me with a fierce shout.

In less time than I can tell it, they had me overpowered, and bound fast, with my back against one of the vinecurtained pillars of the porch.

"What in thunder's the meaning of this?" I gasped, as soon as I could find a voice.

"You've deceived me!" said Jess, the outlaw, in a cold, deadly tone. "Cutts here has been to Booneville, and found out all about you. You ain't no doctor at all. One!"

He drew his revolver as he spoke, the three others imitating his example. Then the four muzzles were aimed at my heart.

[Back]*These are actual facts belonging to the history of the late war.

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CHAPTER V. Jess Outwitted -- Detectives in Council

I managed to preserve my coolness, even at this terrible moment, which I did not doubt for an instant was to prove my last on earth.

"Do as you please about killing me," I said, without a tremble in my voice, "but I have deceived in no material respect."

"There never was a doctor in Booneville named Phillips," said Jesse James, his finger still on the trigger, while the muzzles of the other revolvers also continued to stare at me unwaveringly.

"I know it, and in that trifling regard only did I deceive you," said I. "Judge Rideau though it best that I should conceal the fact of my being a personal friend of his, and on his advice I hit upon the plan pursued. The rest of my story will be verified by the judge himself, whom you know to be incapable of falsehood."

"You're a spy -- a detective in disguise," exclaimed Jesse, savagely.

"You're a liar, and you must know that you lie," I replied. "How about those tokens -- those mementos? Do you dare to tell me that you doubt their genuineness?"

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"I say, Jess, there needn't be no hurry about this thing," said Frank James, putting up his pistol.

Younger and Cutts did the same. Sheppard stood among the horses, but a few paces away, apparently as unconcerned as a man of stone, and with his single eye fastened upon me with pretended pitilessness.

My last remark had occasioned an interested rustle of garments on the porch behind me, and a moment later the women came out on the lawn to have a look at me.

Jesse James remained immovable, with his revolver still covering my breast, but my last response seemed to have mollified him a little.

Nevertheless he growled out an oath, saying:

"I don't care a curse for that! I warned you against deceiving me in the least particular, and die you must."

His wife here placed her hand on his wrist, and told him to go first and talk the matter over with the others. He complied reluctantly, though still keeping his eye threateningly upon me, even after putting up his revolver.

Just at that moment I recalled in a flash the assistance she had promised me in case I should succeed in finding out the concealed child, and the signal by which she had told me to notify her of such an event.

Simultaneously with the same thought occurred the invigorating reflection that I had not been deprived of my revolver, and that my horse, a splendid animal, might be reached in two or three bounds should I suddenly be freed of my bonds.

In my emergency, I couldn't afford to weigh the question of sincerity or insincerity that was involved.

I watched for my opportunity when Jesse James had momentarily withdrawn his eyes from me, and was conferring with his brother and Cole Younger. I then caught the attention of Jesse's wife, and gave her the sign, swiftly pursing up my lips and elevating my eyebrows.

I saw that I was understood. A slight color came into her face, she seemed to hesitate a moment, and then she left her companion's side with seeming carelessness, and returned to the porch.

I heard the rustle of her skirt in the vine behind me and then a slight clicking sound. I suddenly felt that the bonds fastening me to the porch post had been severed -- that I was free.

There was then a retreating rustle of skirts. I waited, to give my liberator a chance to retire into the house, while stealthily feeling down for the butt of my revolver, and gathering my strength and nerves for a supreme effort.

Then I simultaneously drew my pistol and bounded toward my horse, while giving utterances to an Apache yell.

Drawing their weapons, the four men turned toward me with the quickness of lightning, but I was quicker than they. My first shot struck Jesse's pistol, knocking it from his hand while it was exploding. My second pierced Cole Younger's right arm, as he was on the point of firing, causing it to drop powerless at his side. Then Frank James' bullet sang harmlessly over my head, as my third bound brought me into the saddle, and a blow of my left hand sent George Sheppard sprawling -- for his own good and appearances' sake. Then, as I wheeled my horse, I nipped Master Cutt's hostile intentions in the bud by sending a bullet through his body, and the next instant I was up and away for the skirting forest like the wind, with their bullets whistling after me, though, fortunately, without effect.

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I heard them thundering after me in pursuit, even before I could gain the woods. But, with Jesse James' Dancer out of the race by reason of his sprain, I knew that I was the best mounted, my only remaining danger lying in my unfamiliarity with the way.

However, fortune favored me signally. My horse went crashing through the forest like a bolt, and seemed to find the first bridle-path by a sort of dumb instinct. From this we gained the wild by-road and went plunging down it. The few suspicious dwellers by the way — all of them, inferentially, in sympathy with the gang — came rushing out of their lonely cabins to see me pass, some of them rifle in hand — but that was all. Not a shot was fired, not an impediment offered. I was soon out of the perilous intricacies of the hills, out upon the broad highroad leading to Independence.

For the first time, according to common report, Jesse James' fairly cornered victim had escaped with life and liberty, and I was the man.

On reaching Independence I said nothing of my adventure, but went at once to my room in the hotel. Half an hour later I issued thence in my own proper person. Even the James brothers' lynx-eyed suspicion would not have recognized my identity with the old country doctor from Booneville who had been the guest-prisoner for so long.

The robbery of the train at Winston had naturally intensified the local excitement incident upon the seizure of the fair association's assets, and the murder of the detectives that had preceded it. I carefully abstained from adding to the prevailing alarm by making public my own adventures.

The detectives and other officials, with whom I was professionally acquainted, were out on the road, engaged in their vain pursuit of the robbers.

But, late on the following night, I found myself at a conference in an obscure cabin, owned by an old regress named Aunt Cynthy, on the outskirts of the town. The outside approaches to the cabin were thoroughly sentinelled. The old negro woman herself could be relied on. She was none other than the nurse who had befriended Blanche Rideau at St. Joseph, after the latter's mad schoolgirl's marriage with Tom Younger, the bandit.

It was out of old Cynthy's possession, also, at Booneville, that Blanche's child had been subsequently stolen, and she hated Jesse James and his whole gang with a hatred bordering on frenzy.

It must be mentioned in passing, however, that she had no faith in Judge Rideau's ultimate recovery of the boy through my exertions or by any other means. She implicitly believed that the boy had long since been put to death by Jesse James, whom she thought capable of any cowardly, as well as any desperate crime. In this I did not agree with her.

My associates in the cabin were Captain Dick Masters, of Independence; Sheriff Timberlake and Captain Craig (police commissioner), of Kansas City; Jack Gorham, an independent private detective, like myself, and Sloane and Chipps, my personal assistants, who have already been cursorily introduced to the reader in the guise of negro minstrels.

My companions had returned, dejected and out of humor, after a bootless all-day pursuit of the robbers. But I had just recounted my own adventures, consider ably to their enlivenment, and after learning with satisfaction that not one of the posse of seven had been killed outright, or even seriously wounded, in the wild charge through their line, in which I had participated under compulsion, several days previously.

Then there had fallen on us all the natural sense of awkwardness incident to men bent upon the same general object, but not heartily associated or organized in the attainment.

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"Here's the difficulty!" at last exclaimed Craig, bringing his fist down heavily on the table around which we were sitting. "It's the general desire to earn individually the rattling big rewards offered by the Government the railroads and the express companies, instead of working all together and making a fair division in case of success."

"To which may be added the five thousand offered by the fair association," I observed, with an assenting nod.

"To which will be added twenty or thirty thousand more by whatever country banks Jesse and his gang shall succeed in robbing, doubtless before we can find hide or hair of 'em," smilingly supplemented Jack Gorham, also on the independent "lay."

It was a clear case of diamond cut diamond. There was a general smile, followed by a look of gloom. Then Timberlake's fist was brought down on the table in its turn:

"That's just it!" he exclaimed. "And the question simply is, whether we can afford to work independently or only in halfhearted fellowship, instead of all in concert together, with a common will, and with a common interest in view."

"Ay, that's the talk," said Masters. "Hasn't the fate of Pinkerton's Chicagoans proved the futility of private action against the Jameses and their devil's crew? Three were killed, and Jewell, the sole survivor, slunk homeward yesterday, halfscared out of his senses, though naturally a man of steady nerve."

Then the three regulars looked askance at Gorham and me, while my two fellows, Sloane and Chipps, silently awaited my decision. What had been advanced was most sensible. I had given it much thought during several days, and now once more turned the matter slowly over in my mind.

"Gentlemen, I'll tell you what I'll agree to, and stand by," said I, at length. "I'll associate with you all, heart and soul, against the entire James gang, share and share alike in such rewards as apply to its members, with the sole exceptions of Jesse and Frank James. Let whosoever succeeds in bringing in these chiefs, alive or dead, claim and receive the entire reward pertaining to them individually, be their actual captors one, two, three, or even more of our number."

This proposition received at once the thoughtful attention it deserved.

"You're wide-awake for number one, at all events, Lawson," said Timberlake. "You now know more about the lives and habits of the James than any of the rest of us."

"Haven't I obtained the knowledge at the repeated risk of my life?" I coolly replied. "Moreover, your remark is not strictly correct, Timberlake. George Sheppard knows far more of the Jameses than I do. He was with them in Quantrell's guerrillas; robbed, murdered and fought with them all through the Kentucky bank robberies, and is now in your employ."

This silenced the sheriff, but Craig made haste to say:

"But, Lawson, the rewards out on the Jameses makes an amount half as great as those that are out on the entire remainder of the gang, the three Youngers included."

"I am aware of that," said I, dryly, "but you have my proposition, which is the only one I care to make. I should think I'd already shown my good-will toward you regulars by giving you the names of those, greenies and all, who were engaged the other night in the train robbery at Winston."

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"So you did," said Masters, with real heartiness. "We'll nab the telegraph operator, Bulger, to-morrow, and then the rest of the greenies, at least, one after another. There'll be a right smart reward forthcoming for even them, and you'll get the heavier share of it, as you deserve."

"I'm in favor of Lawson's proposition!" suddenly exclaimed Gorham, springing up and seizing my hand. "It's every man for himself, so far as the James boys are concerned, and all of us together, share and share alike, for the rest of the gang! Gentlemen, what do you say?"

"I agree," said Masters, taking my hand with equal heartiness.

"So do I!" cried Timberlake, "And I'll answer for the co-operation of my agent, George Sheppard."

"You can count me in, since it's a family affair," called out-Craig. "My man, the ax-robber, Charley Ford, will likewise stand in with the agreement."

"Of course, Chipps and I," said Sloane, indicating his chum, "are already booked in the interest of Billy Lawson, our chief.

We all then suddenly joined hands, and formally agreed to abide by the conditions embodied in the proposition I had made.

"You're welcome to the advantage you'll have over the rest of us, Billy," laughingly observed Gorham, as we renewed our seats, with something good to drink suddenly set before us by old Cynthy. "None of them will ever suspect your identity with the old Booneville doctor, and you can play off fresh in the future."

This was in allusion to the smooth-shaven guilelessness of my natural appearance, which was at that time exceptionally boyish for my age.

We had hardly ratified our agreement before we were joined by Charley Ford. He was a quiet, selfcontained, resolute fellow, formerly an active member of the James band, but in retirement from it for several years, and now secretly in Commissioner Craig's employ. Then, a little later, much to my astonishment, but not less to the gratification of all of us, who should next put in an appearance, but George Sheppard.

They were first mate acquainted with the agreement we had just entered into. This they eagerly endorsed. Then Ford gave a choice bit of information that he had brought from up the river, and Sheppard, after learning that I had been beforehand with him in regard to all necessary information concerning the Winston affair, told us of the changes that had taken place in the James' programme incidental to my escape.

"I never saw a man so infernally mad as Jess James was after you had got away, colonel," said Sheppard. "He acted like a demon. But to this hour it is a mystery to him how you managed to burst your bonds, though I have my private opinion on the subject. Thanks for the upset you gave me as you regained the saddle. That, and the tearin' mad way in which I helped to bang away after you as you broke for the woods, about finished up making me hunk once more in Jess' good graces. For the rest, you didn't even mark Jess in shootin' the pistol out of his hand, but you shot Cutts through the body, from which he's likely to turn up his toes, and Cole Younger will have a sore arm for a month to come."

"Doubtless the band won't meet now at the Widow James' for the division of the Winston swag, as they had intended," said I.

"Not by a long shot!" was the reply. "Your escape has given that scheme away. By the way, Lawson, you've got it wrong about the James boys' mother. She's the Widow Samuels now, having married a second time, years ago,

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not long after the death of these boys' father, who was a Baptist preacher, odd enough."

"It's no difference. She's called as often by one name as the other," said Timberlake. "But the Jameses are cute. I doubt if they'll ever make any divvy of the Winston swag. What's their next move? That's what we're after."

"The gang, or part of 'em, start for Jasper County, this State, the day after to-morrow," said Sheppard. "I'm to be one of 'em to look out in advance for detectives, and give warnin' of the same."

And he burst into a laugh.

"What's the racket?"

"A descent on the bank either at Empire City or Sin that county," was the reply. "As I'll be sent forward in advance, and they'll be sure to reconnoitre at Empire City first, you'd better all be lyin' in wait at S-. The towns are only a few miles apart. I can slip you a telegraphic dispatch as to what place to be on the lookout for 'em."

"Good!" cried Timberlake. "We'll be on hand, all of us, shall we not, boys?"

The rest of us unanimously fell in with the scheme, and the conference broke up.

After a few words in private with George Sheppard, I was the last to leave the cabin. Before doing so I said to old Cynthy:

"Are you still so sure, Cynthy, of my never recovering poor Blanche's little boy, Tip?"

"Oh, Lor', yes, cunel; dead sure ob cat!" replied the old creature, rolling up the yellows of her eyes. "Dat debble, Jess James, hab put de pore little chit out ob de way long afore dis. De ole jedge, fur all his money, 'll nebber lay eyes on his little gran'chile."

"You'll think otherwise before long, Cynthy, depend upon it. But in case I should be able to produce the child -- bring him here to your cabin -- would you be able to identify him as the judge's grandson? I mean to say, would you know him again?"

"Know him -- know Missus Blanche's boy? Go long, cunnel! Ob course I would. Why, I brung him up. He war nigh onto two year when he war stole, an he ain't half past five now. Know him ag'in -- pore Blanche's chile -- de little Tip Younger? Lor' bless my soul! What you done took me fur, cunnel?"

"Well, that's all I wanted to know," said I, wishing her good-night; "and I'm glad I've made sure of it."

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CHAPTER VI. A Bold Raid -- Jesse James' Cunning

Three or four days after this, we detectives were gathered together in a small saloon in the town of S--, anxiously awaiting news from George Sheppard.

At about the same time of day -- say ten in the morning -- Jesse and Frank James, Jim Cummings, Dick Little, Wood and Jeff Hite, and Ed Miller, all veteran desperadoes, accompanied by George Sheppard, approached the neighboring town of Empire City, by the wild, hilly country from the northeast. They were all more or less disguised, though they wore no masks; Jesse James' boast to me of never under any circumstances wearing a

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disguise having been a piece of empty braggadocio entirely devoid of truth.

This party of scoundrels halted at an exceptionally lonely point on the road, within less than a mile of the town. Then George Sheppard was sent forward to reconnoitre. He was instructed to take his time, and return with a report as to the number of armed men, if any, to be seen about the streets, and especially as to the character of the bank's interior, the number of officials, the number of customers likely to be met with by a raiding party, and the like.

But Jesse James did not yet thoroughly trust Sheppard. Shortly after the latter had set out upon his mission, Ed Miller was dispatched to track and watch him. His orders were to leave his horse at the entrance of the town, and thence to follow up Sheppard's movements secretly. In case of any symptoms of treachery he was to hurry back with his report, so as to precede the return of Sheppard, who, in that case, was to be put to death as soon as he should again show up.

Ed Miller was trusted implicitly. He was a veritable enthusiast in his iniquitous career. The service assigned to him was faithfully performed in less than an hour. He then returned to the rendezvous with convincing proof of Sheppard's treachery. The latter had been closely shadowed from place to place in the town. He had at last been seen to send a telegraphic dispatch to S-- , after which he had sauntered away and entered the bank building.

Miller, a few minutes later, had ascertained at the telegraph station that Sheppard's dispatch had been addressed to "G. H. Timberlake," at S-- . This was enough.

Miller had hurried back to his comrades with this momentous piece of news. But before they could recover breath from the momentary excitement into which it had thrown them, George Sheppard appeared on the road in his turn, riding directly toward them.

"Shut up, all of you!" called out Jesse James, in a hoarse whisper. "Try to look careless till we get him in our clutches. Don't let him dream that we suspect him."

But Sheppard, though only one-eyed, was as wide-awake as Jesse himself. He had already perceived that something was wrong, and had, consequently, come to a halt within a couple of hundred yards of the band.

"Why don't you come on?" at last shouted Jesse, himself first losing his self-control in his thirst for revenge.
"What are you afraid of?"

Then Sheppard was morally certain that his doubledealing had been found out. So, before wheeling his steed to become a fugitive, he leveled his revolver, drew a steady bead, and fired.

He paused long enough to see Jesse James clap his hand to his neck and reel in his saddle, and then dashed away at a break-neck gallop. Part of the band pursued him for a considerable distance, but without success, and the ex-robber succeeded in reaching the shelter of the town in safety, and in giving timely warning to the bank officials.

It was in consequence of these happenings that we, at S-- , received two telegraphic notifications from George Sheppard, about half an hour apart:

The first read as follows:

EMPIRE CITY, --- , 10:40 A. M.

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"G. H. TIMBERLAKE: -- Gang are waiting my report on road about a mile away. From what I shall report to them, they will doubtless make the descent some time this morning. If you don't hear again from me within an hour, come right on, blocking up the road leading to the northeast.

S."

The second dispatch, received just as we were getting out our horses, was as follows:

EMPIRE CITY, ---, 11:20 A. M.

"G. H. TIMBERLAKE: -- Gang have shadowed and found me out. Have just shot Jesse James off his horse, with a bullet in the neck. Sha'n't dare to leave this place without your escort. Come right on. Suppose gang has scattered.

S."

Timberlake had no sooner read the last dispatch to himself than he threw up his hat and cheered. Then, after he had read it aloud to us, we also threw up our hats and cheered. However, notwithstanding my first feeling of keen disappointment, I at once began to have my doubts as to the certainty of Sheppard having "done for" Jesse James.

"Hooray!" shouted Timberlake. "Whether we bag the rest of 'em or not, Jesse James, the head devil of the game, is no more. That ought to satisfy us. Come on. We'll ride over to Empire City and see Sheppard safe out of it."

We rode out of S--- together. Timberlake's exuberance seemed to be shared by all the rest, myself alone excepted. But why they should all so suddenly jump to the conclusion that Jesse James was dead, when he might only have been wounded, was more than I could understand. Perhaps it was explained by their all wanting him dead so badly that the wish was father to the thought.

Soon after we had taken our leisurely way toward Empire City, we met a large drove of lean, widehorned Texas steers that were being driven across the State.

Not long after they had passed we heard a great shouting and bursts of coarse laughter up the road. Five or six rough-looking horsemen, wearing dusky blouses and huge slouched hats, apparently Texan cowboys, and drunk at that, were gathered about a madly-plunging steer, which had been made temporarily fast with ropes, while they likewise seemed to be tying something on its back.

The meaning of the odd scene was soon explained to us.

We had just time to shrink back to either side of the road when the suddenly liberated steer came charging down the road in the direction of S---. The cowboys were behind in full career, yelling, cursing, and screaming with brutal laughter. Blood was in the steer's eye, frenzy in his tossing horns; and, firmly lashed to his back, kicking, writhing, and shrieking piteously, was a poor devil of a Chinese basketpeddler, who had thus been pinioned to make a Missouri holiday.

"Cl'ar the track!" shouted one of the ruffians, as he dashed by us with his comrades in pursuit. "How's this for a Chinese Mazeppa, hey?"

"An infernally cruel piece of sport!" exclaimed Timberlake, following the steer and horseman with his eyes.

"A mild enough one, though, for Texas drovers to engage in," said Craig, with a laugh. "Come, let's ride back and see the upshot of it. There'll be a healthy excitement as they pass through the long main street of the town."

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As he suited the action to the word, and the distance was not great, we followed him.

We reached the crest of a rise in the road overlooking the town, and not far from it, just as the steer dashed into the main street, with the ruffians in pursuit.

"Hello! Cruel or not cruel, it's a jolly row they're kicking up," cried Craig, who had been a Texas boy himself in his day. "Lord, look at the people scatter! There's an apple cart upset, and now the bull is charging its tormentors in his turn. What life there is in the Chinaman! How he kicks and squirms! Hallo! There's one of the cowboys unhorsed! No; he's up and away again! There go the big horns through a showwindow. Now he's charging across the street again. By Jupiter! By Jupiter! but he can't be going through there, and with those screaming devils after him. But he is, though, and no mistake! Come along, boys, we must see the end of this. Some of the bank officials may be hurt. This is pushing a mad game too far."

We at once galloped after him down the hill. His last expression had been called forth by the maddened steer disappearing into the wide doorway of the National Bank of S-- , followed by his yelling pursuers, one after the other.

As we approached the bank building, a few minutes later, we heard a couple of shots, and made sure that the steer had been shot down somewhere in among the desks and money counters.

Then, with some difficulty, by reason of the excited crowd in the street, we approached the doors. As we did so, we heard the shouting cowboys galloping away by another street, or lane, having made their exit from the bank by a back doorway.

A scene of woeful havoc and confusion presented itself as we dismounted and pushed our way into the bank.

The steer had fallen from exhaustion at the farther end of the broad passage reaching around the desks and counters, with the Chinaman, now in a faint, still fastened to his back, and was frothing at the mouth, while still swaying his great breadth of horns to and fro defiantly. The glass doors were smashed front and back, one of the counters overturned, and the blackwalnut panels of the partition broken through in places.

But worse than this, the floor inside of the partitions about the open doors of the money-vault, was strewn with a confused litter of torn documents, tattered packages of bank bills, rifled tin boxes, and even scattered gold coin.

Worse still, amid this litter, supported by two bystanders, lay the unconscious form of a whitehaired, venerable gentleman, with the blood rushing from a ghastly pistol-shot wound in the breast. At the foot of a near desk, amid the remains of a shivered high office stool, lay another unconscious figure -- that of a bookkeeper -- senseless from a terrible blow, doubtless with the butt of a revolver, on the top of the head; while another and younger clerk was still cowering underneath a desk a little farther off, though more frightened than hurt.

"Great Lord!" exclaimed Timberlake, in a bewildered, stupefied tone, as we all took in this scene of destruction and horror at a glance. "Can this have been the work of these cowboys?"

"Cowboys!" sneered one of the bystanders, with an oath. "A sweet-scented lot of detectives you are, the hull lot of you! Couldn't you tumble to the trick they were playing you and the rest of us, with the wild steer and the Chinaman? Cowboys! Bah! They were the James boys and their gang, in disguise -- that's what they were! And they're off now, with ten thousand dollars out of that vault in their saddlebags, leavin' the old cashier shot through the heart, and the bookkeeper with a fractured skull."

"Quick, boys! To horse, and after 'em!" yelled Timberlake, making a break for the door.

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Scarcely less mortified than he, we followed. A moment later we were in the saddle, galloping madly in the direction the bank robbers had taken, and heedless of the townspeople's jeers that greeted our departure.

Our pursuit was not continued long, however, before we were convinced that there was no chance of its success. The robbers had gained the broken country to the south of the town, and the hills might as well have swallowed them up, for all the opportunity that was afforded us for overtaking, or even getting sight of them.

We returned to S--, crestfallen and broken-spirited in the middle of the afternoon. It was to find the bank cashier dead, and the bookkeeper in a critical condition by reason of his wounds. An examination of the bank's funds, however, had been made by several of the directors, showing that the robbers had carried off between fifteen and eighteen thousand dollars.

We questioned several persons who had a good look at the robbers, and who were familiar with the personal appearance of the James brothers. All these witnesses concurred in assuring us that Jesse James was not among the gang who had effected the robbery, though they had all fully identified both Frank James and Jim Cummings as prominent participants in the affair.

This would seem to support Sheppard's declaration that he had succeeded in giving the redoubtable Jesse James his quietus. Sheppard stoutly reiterated his assertion when we saw him at Empire City, on the evening of that same eventful, disastrous day, and he gave us the succinct account of his own adventure with the outlaws with which this chapter was opened.

I will not dwell needlessly on the added blaze of excitement which this bank robbery created in Missouri and the adjoining States.

For the ensuing month, or more, the dreaded band kept so quiet and invisible that they were thought and hoped by many to have permanently quitted the State. In this impression some of the detectives and officers, perhaps the majority, concurred, while others did not. I was among those who did not think so.

A still larger majority believed in the report, soon widespread, that Jesse James, the robber chief, had been killed. Ford, Gorham and I were about the only detectives who refused to take any stock in the report.

During that month, or six weeks, of apparent inactivity, we occupied ourselves with hunting down and bringing to justice the greenhorns who had participated in the Winston train robbery. In this connection, Sheppard and I were used to advantage as witnesses for identification. Upward of thirty arrests were made. They were made from among farmers' and townspeople's sons who had been more or less distinguished for fastness and dis-orderly lives, many of them well-to-do and of good early training. Of this number, eight were brought to trial and conviction, with State prison sentences for long terms.

They were nearly all very hardened, though. Confessions as to their own guilt were not exceptions, but not one of them could be brought to "give away" the whereabouts of the veterans of the gang, or divulge anything else that might lead to pursuit and capture. They all, likewise, seemed to believe in Jesse James' death, some of them even shedding tears, as for the death of an ideal man. Indeed, he was their ideal, and men sincerely mourn such a loss, be it that of saint or thief, a noble patriot or a soulless, crimesteeped robber.

However, soon after the last of these minor convictions had taken place, Charley Ford came to me in Kansas City and said:

"There's a big thing over at headquarters, Lawson. Two young fellows have brought in a corpse, which they say is Jesse James', and for which they claim the 'dead or alive' rewards."

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I looked up, incredulously.

"Fact!" he continued. "They claim that Sheppard's bullet in the neck only proved fatal yesterday; that they nursed him in a lone cabin up in the Blue Hills up to the moment of his death. Just before it occurred, they say, Jesse, out of gratitude for their kindnesses, told them to take the steps they were now taking with his dead body, in order to secure for themselves the heavy rewards offered."

This part of the news touched me "on the raw," so to speak, and I started to my feet.

"Come on over," resumed Ford. "All our crowd are there, including the sheriff and the police commissioner. They all take stock in the young fellow's statement, too. They are waiting for you to identify the remains as Jesse's before giving the lads the certificate on which to claim the rewards."

I regarded the story as preposterous. But, eager as I was to prove it so, I hated to spare the time just then. I had got what I thought was a clew to judge Rideau's grandchild, which I had been on the point of following up when Ford interrupted me. However, I accompanied him at once.

"Either you or Sheppard could identify the corpse, if it is really Jesse James', as well as I," I suggested, on the way.

"Sheppard might, but he's up-country just now," was the reply. "As for me, when I last saw Jesse he hadn't grown the beard that he's been credited with since. I can't be certain, but the face staring up out of the pine coffin over yonder looks wonderfully like Jesse's would, if dead instead of alive."

This answer shook my disbelief more than anything else he had said.

A great crowd was gathered about headquarters as we approached. There was also at the entrance a mudsplashed team and wagon, by which the lads had come in from the hills with their melancholy freight.

The large, bare room back of the office was crowded with citizens and policemen as Ford and I made our way into it. They were pressing around a rude, rough-board coffin that lay upon trestles in the center. The coffin had been uncovered. Near its head stood the beardless but hard-looking young men who had brought it there. Timberlake, Craig, Masters and others of my profession were in close proximity.

"Room there for Bill Lawson," cried Craig, as I approached. "Here's the man who can and will identify this dead face as Jesse James', if any one can."

The crowd made way for me. As I approached the open head of the coffin, I steadily studied the faces of the two young fellows. Neither recognized me. I hadn't taken the trouble to inquire what names they had given themselves, feeling sure that they had made use of aliases.

Then, amid a general hush of expectancy, my eyes rested upon the inanimate coffined face.

It was but for an instant. I raised them again, with a contemptuous laugh.

"Hello! What's up?" cried Timberlake. "Ain't the body Jess James'?"

"Not a bit of it, though there's a slight resemblance," I replied. "The outlaw is in a new role when he tries to sell his own corpse to the authorities. How are you, Master Cutts? How are you, Master Larry the Lamb?"

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The persons addressed were, indeed, none other than the young desperadoes I had named, the former still looking thin and worn, as though but recently recovered from my bullet through the body.

They turned pale at my offhand recognition, and seemed to be gathering themselves together for a rush through the crowd; but I had them covered with my revolver in an instant, and they were at once seized and handcuffed.

"Look out!" I shouted, while the utmost excitement for a moment took possession of every one in the room.

"Jesse James may be here among us at this very instant!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" hoarsely laughed a big, uncouth-looking fellow, with his face nearly concealed by the brim of a huge soft hat, as he slouched carelessly toward the door. "Trick or no trick, it was one that none but a bold cuss would have tried."

I recognized the voice, in spite of his attempt to disguise it.

"That's Jess James!" I shouted, springing forward, pistol in hand, with my comrades at my back. "Seize him! Shoot him down!"

"Come on!" replied the outlaw, dashing off his hat and brandishing a revolver, while he backed through the door. "Come on, if you dare!"

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CHAPTER VII. The Missing Child -- Jesse and His Gang Awake After a Long Sleep

It was, indeed, Jesse, the outlaw himself, who had secretly watched the whole scene about his alleged remains, and who would, doubtless, have quickly appropriated the reward, had they been paid over to his youthful satellites.

The crack of a dozen revolvers saluted his exit from the big room, and as many bullets went whistling after him. But he was not the fated billet to stop any of them just then. We dashed after him in a body. But he had already shouldered his way through the crowded outer room, and by the time we reached the open air, the outlaw had already bounded across the broad thoroughfare to where his matchless sorrel was standing, and vaulted into the saddle.

"Good-by, Lawson!" he shouted to me, as he galloped away amid an ineffectual shower of bullets. "I know you now, and the doctor's dodge you played on me. We shall be once more together alone -- and for the last time."

We did not attempt an instant pursuit, but made the best of our disappointment and bad humor.

Both Cutts and Larry the Lamb, whose real name was understood to be Finken, subsequently made a confession as to their share in the attempted deception. According to this confession, Jesse James had only been slightly wounded in the back of the neck by Sheppard's bullet. Instantly upon receiving the wound, however, there had occurred to the outlaw the plot of feigning death, in furtherance of the elaborate subsequent scheme, which, perhaps, but for me, would have been carried to a successful issue.

He, therefore, on receiving the trifling wound, threw up his hands and reeled in his saddle, for George Sheppard's especial benefit. The latter, however, was no sooner out of sight than the outlaw leader, while his neck was being

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bound up with some handkerchiefs by Miller, proceeded to plan out the attack on the bank in the neighboring town of S—. Still intent on his scheme of pretended death, he had, however, taken no active part in this robbery. It was carried out, in the unique manner I have described, by the rest of the gang under the leadership of Frank James and Jim Cummings.

The successful scoundrels had subsequently joined Jesse in the Blue Hills, whither he had gone, accompanied by Miller. Here a division of the booty was made. The gang had then been temporarily dispersed, Jesse remaining alone in a remote and deserted cabin unlit accompanied there by the youths, Cutts and Larry the Lamb, for whom he had sent, and who were both blindly devoted to him.

Here they lived in secret, supported by the game with which the wild region abounded, and biding the development of the plot. One thing was indispensable — a corpse that could be palmed off as Jesse's with any reasonable chance of success. Even this was not a great while forthcoming.

At the end of five or six weeks of seclusion Jim Cummings sent up to the hermitage in the Blue Hills one Pat Moriarty, who had once belonged to the gang, but had severed his connection therewith, after a quarrel with the outlaw leader over the division of some booty, and, strangely enough, he resembled Jesse not a little. That resemblance doubtless determined Cummings' action, and was chiefly instrumental in sealing poor Moriarty's fate.

The latter sought the hermitage under the impression that Jesse wanted to renew friendly relations. Indeed, he was received with every appearance of cordiality. None the less, however, did a convenient game of cards engross the reunited worthies without loss of time. A quarrel, with high words, ensued. Then an accusation on the part of the Irishman who was being outrageously cheated with intentional clumsiness. Then Jesse's ready revolver put in its conclusive remark, and — the desired dead man was furnished, ready for delivery.

Such was the brief history of one of the most originally daring plots in the annals of crime, and, which, perhaps, only miscarried by the merest chance; for the outlaw's female relatives, if conversant with the scheme would doubtless have identified falsely, if called upon.

Cutts and Larry the Lamb, on being brought to trial, were promptly convicted of participation in many crimes, partly on my evidence and partly on their own confessions, and were sentenced to prodigiously long terms in the State prison.

We had by this time pretty thoroughly weeded out the farmer-boy associations of the outlaws, as their hairbrained youthful admirers and emulators might be denominated. Hereafter, for a certain time at least, the veterans of the band had to be more cautious and circumspect in their movements. It was not long, however, before we discovered that the gang was still in the vicinity.

It was Gorham who gave the warning.

Meeting Ford and myself one day in Kansas City, he stopped us. He was greatly excited.

"Hurry up!" he exclaimed. "Both Timberlake and Craig, with the rest, are waiting for you at headquarters. There's a big job on foot."

"What is it?" I asked, much interested.

"The hull James gang have arranged to stop and rob the west-bound express this side of Topeka, in the Red Cut this evening. We're to load up one of the cars with our men, and be ready to make it hot for 'm."

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This was the sort of talk that suited me. I cheerfully accompanied him and Ford to headquarters, after getting rid of my peddler's disguise on the way.

Timberlake and the rest of the officers and detectives were already there, hastily preparing for the expedition, for it was now late in the afternoon.

"There's lively work ahead, gentlemen, even if this Red Cut trap should miss fire," said the sheriff, genially. "The Jameses and their crew are awake and wicked, like rattlesnakes after their winter's nap. Dick Little and another of their number have made overtures to me in the hope of a pardon and let out a whole bagful of secrets. If they get through with this affair, they next take in the Minnesota bank project, which they've long had in view. Come, hurry up, the train will be along in twenty minutes."

A car had already been provided for us by the railroad management. We entered it with seeming carelessness, one by one, without exciting undue outside attention. There were fifteen of us, all told. They included those to whom the reader has already been introduced, together with six special constables, stanch and experienced men, who could be relied on.

When the train came along our car was quietly incorporated with it, being placed in the front, next behind the express messenger's car. No intimation was given to any others on the train as to what was expected; and away we went.

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CHAPTER VIII. A Terrific Battle With the Outlaws

"Throw up your hands! Down from that engine, or my bullet's in your heart! Where's the express messenger?"

The words were sharp and explosive. The voice was that of Jesse, the outlaw. Our train had just been balked by a false signal in the Red Cut. By peering out of the car windows we could see the robbers, some dismounted, some still in the saddle, thronging both sides of the track, with the steep bluffs of the cutting at their backs. The dusk of evening was rapidly deepening.

"Quick -- you chaps that I named!" called out Timberlake, in a hoarse whisper. "To the front, Lawson! Craig will attend to the rear."

Our car had long before been especially altered for just this sort of an emergency. Timberlake arose while speaking, and pressed a spring over his head. A trapdoor in the roof of the car noiselessly opened. He shinned up through it like a cat, more clumsily followed by the six constables. In the meantime, while Craig headed a part of our remaining force toward the rear door, I stole forward, followed by Gorham, Ford, George Sheppard, and my personal satellites, Sloane and Chipps.

As I slid back the door, Cole Younger confronted me, revolver in hand. Others were at his back, still others were breaking into the express car, right ahead, and there was the customary pandemonium of curses, yells, and pistol-shots being raised on every side, for the purpose of creating a panic.

"Hello!" cried Cole, doubtless taking us for scared passengers trying to escape. "Back with you, or -- "

I knocked up his hand, shot down his immediate companion, and grabbing his throat, jerked him to his knees, and hurled him back among my comrades.

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"Secure that one!" I shouted. "If he gives any trouble, kill him!"

This was a mistaken move for me. Shots were immediately exchanged behind me, and Younger engaged in such a desperate hand-to-hand struggle with my followers that I stepped out upon the platform almost alone.

Two robbers had just clambered on the opposite platform, one of whom drew a bead on me and fired. I shrank to one side in time, but the shot intended for me struck Sloane, who was behind me, and he fell with a groan. I then dropped his assailant dead on the couplings, and, with another shot, disabled his companion so that he tumbled off the left-hand side all of a heap.

Then, as I jumped off on the other side, and ran to the assistance of the express messenger, who, though wounded, was bravely defending the broken sideentrance of his car against Jesse James, Frank James, and Jim Cummings; the wildest confusion prevailed.

Timberlake and his constables were promiscuously shooting down upon the ruffians from the top of the car, while Craig and his men had just issued from the rear, and were opening fire in every direction with good effect.

It was evident that a panic had seized the bandits in their turn. They had been completely taken by surprise, and the majority of them were already wavering.

As I rushed to the messenger's assistance, I fired another shot that only grazed Frank James' cheek, and at the same instant the messenger was pitched headlong out of his bravely defended car, with Jesse James' bullet in his heart.

Then, Cummings and Frank James being at that instant suddenly engaged by Chipps and Gorham, who had succeeded in following me, I drew a fresh bead on Jesse. At the instant of firing, however, one of his panic-stricken subordinates rushed in between us, receiving my bullet in his skull.

That was the last shot in my first repeater, and there was no time to draw my second. Nevertheless, before the outlaw leader could fire in return, I flew at his throat, grappling him so closely that he could not use the weapon.

To and fro, backward and forward we swayed and struggled silently amid the deadly din and confusion, until at last I tripped over a prostrate body under the windows of the second car, and went down on my back.

But my lucky star was in the ascendant on that eventful evening. The outlaw's knee was on my breast, his revolver at my head; I could see the baleful glitter of his eyes, and hear the gritting of his teeth. At that instant, however, a dead constable toppled over from the roof of the car, crushing my assailant to the earth, and giving me another chance for my life.

Nevertheless, he was on his feet again as soon as I, and again his repeater covered me.

"Curse you! do you carry a charmed life?" he hissed, through his gnashing teeth. "But now -- this time you are doomed!"

But again he reckoned without my lucky star. A carwindow was suddenly slid up but two or three feet away and a woman's jeweled hand was thrust out, holding a small pocket-revolver in its delicate but firm grip.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed a silvery voice, as the timely little weapon flashed and barked in the outlaw's face. "I owe you an old score, Jesse James, on Dick's account, and here's one toward liquidation."

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Jesse dodged the pill intended for him, but the flash momentarily blinded him, causing him to stagger back. Then a rush of his own retreating men making a break for their horses, separated us, the bullet that I sent after him from my second revolver passed harmlessly over his head, and I lost sight of him.

Bewildered, I turned a hasty glance toward the car. But the jeweled hand had been withdrawn, the window closed, and I could not distinguish the face that was behind it.

"I saw it all!" muttered Ford, passing by me, pistol in hand, and grasping my shoulder. "Your deliverer was Mattie Collins, Dick Little's wife. You can thank her afterward. Come! the villains are on the run."

"Go for their horses!" shouted Timberlake, making his way down from the car roof, followed by the remnants of his constables. "Bar 'em off from their horses, and we've got 'em all dead! I know the cabin they'll run to."

We at once rallied around him in a body, and made a combined rush for the horses of such of the outlaws as had dismounted. We could see them gathered in a knot, under the charge of some boys, on the top of the bluff.

The outlaws, with Jesse James at their head, were also making a rush in the same direction, and with the same object. But we fortunately intercepted them, beat them, and took possession of the animals, while the baffled robbers ran off into the woods, accompanied by their mounted associates.

As they did so, I remarked with bitter regret that Cole Younger was among them, and apparently not even disabled, though it was no fault of mine that he had not remained a captive.

I was the first to reach the horses, and I at once backed the finest one in the lot. This one, to my intense satisfaction, proved to be Dancer, the chief outlaw's sorrel favorite. There were nine more, which were quickly appropriated. Then leaving Craig with the remainder of our men, to look after the train, and to see to the forwarding of the dead, wounded, and captured to Topeka, we dashed away in the pursuit, under Timberlake's leadership.

A bright moon had risen with the falling of night, and the woods that we were obliged to penetrate were but sparsely grown. A five minutes' thundering pace brought us in view of the fugitives, horse and foot. They outnumbered us greatly, but a majority seemed to be under the influence of a panic which their leaders were unable to control.

Presently they separated, those that were mounted dashing off down a rocky road they had been following, while those on foot ran up the side of a steep bare hill toward a small cabin, which was situated near its wooded crest.

"Just as I expected!" shouted Timberlake. "After 'em, boys! Don't give 'em breathing space!"

We spurred straight up the hill in pursuit, emptying our revolvers and reloading as we rode. The robbers, however, succeeded in entering the cabin, and barring the doors and windows, before we could intercept them. Some of our party then dashed around into the thicket directly behind the house, with special instructions, while the rest of us kept peppering the house from the front at long range, to engross the attention of those within.

They replied feebly, and with little effect.

Presently a bright blaze shot up from the rear of the house, and those who had gained the thicket reappeared upon its skirt, and sent us down a cheer of triumph. We responded with a will, for we then knew that it was merely a question of time. They had succeeded in heaping up brushwood against the back of the cabin and firing the place.

In a few seconds, more than half the house was in flames, and we kept banging away unremittingly.

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But that night's battle was to be a series of surprises.

Just as Jesse and Frank James, the three Youngers, and two others, suddenly bolted out of the burning building, and replied to our fire, their mounted companions, who had made a detour of the hill from the road below, instead of taking themselves off, as we had supposed, burst out of the thicket behind, and came rushing to the rescue with an appalling yell.

Our men in that quarter were at once driven down upon our support, and the robbers, firing volley after volley, made a movement as though to engage us once more at close quarters.

They didn't do it, however. We maintained our ground, and with the advantage still in our favor, in spite of their superior numbers, by reason of their remaining for the time being in the strong light of the burning building.

At this stage of the fight something occurred which will seem scarcely credible, but which is none the less true.

The long-range firing was proceeding fast and furious but with very little effect. I was slightly in the advance of our line, when I saw Jesse James return his pistol to his belt, and raise his silver whistle to his lips. The triple blast that he blew upon it was of terrific distinctness. Dancer, the horse that I bestrode, in response to it, suddenly shot straight up into the air, as if a bombshell had exploded under his body. Then he came down with a tremendous shock, humping his back like a camel as he did so, and bringing all his feet together like a goat.

Utterly unprepared for his "bucking," or anything of the sort, I shot aloft as though discharged from a mortar. Nevertheless, even while in the air, I knew the trick that had been played me between master and horse.

"Kill that horse!" I yelled, after I had returned to mother earth, and was rolling over and over down the hill. "He's James' Dancer; the fastest horse in Missouri! Shoot him!"

But when I regained my feet and my scattered senses, Dancer had safely reached his master, who was once more on his back, waving his hand derisively at us, while my comrades were all laughing at me, in spite of the peril of their environments.

The robbers then drew up in line, under Jesse's leadership, and seemed about to charge us. Had they done so, with their numbers and the descent of the hill in their favor, they would doubtless have swept us away like chaff before the wind.

But, for some reason, they suddenly changed their intention. Perhaps it was because of their ammunition: giving out. At all events, they sheered off, and began to make for the winding road at an angle down the slope which carried them considerably off to our right, and, for the time being, we were content. But while this was in progress, a startling episode occurred.

A man, evidently disabled, and whom I recognized as Jim Cummings, suddenly appeared in the doorway of the blazing cabin, pistol and knife in hand. How he had chanced to be left within there, in that condition, none of us could surmise. He seemed hardly able to move, and yelled hoarsely after his confederates.

They, apparently as much surprised as we, came to a confused halt, and seemed undetermined whether to return for him, or leave him to his fate, for they were still under our well-organized fire.

While they were thus hesitating, Cummings suddenly vanished into the lurid interior, as if drawn back into it by some mysterious suction of the air.

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He as suddenly reappeared, however, seemingly mastering his disability. But his clothing was on fire, his skin blackened, his beard singed off his face, and, as he rushed limpingly after his confederates down the hill, still brandishing his weapons, he looked less like a human being than an animated column of flame.

They rolled him on the ground, covered him with a blanket, and, seating him on a horse, which one of the mounted men abandoned for the—purpose, they continued their flight.

We continued to follow them up, intending to procure fresh mounts in the town, and keep up the pursuit all night, or until we should have them run down to a man.

As I had to accompany my companions on foot, I was dreadfully tired when we entered Topeka, the outlaws having skirted it through the woods to the south, but in my excitement I was still as eager for the pursuit as any one else.

The train had, of course, arrived before us, and the town was consequently in a high fever.

We had lost no men in the fight at the cabin. But of our number, the train had brought in poor Sloane's dead body and five badly wounded men. But on the same train were five dead outlaws, and as many more suffering from wounds.

We left these to be looked to by the town and railroad authorities, and lost no time in looking up horses and recruits.

I was riding out of a tavern yard on a fair-looking animal that I had succeeded in securing, when a wellknown silvery laugh caused me to look up. It came from an upper porch, in which was standing a pretty woman, whom I at once divined as the owner of the jeweled hand and pocket-revolver that had been so opportunely thrust out of the car window to my rescue in my grapple with the outlaw chief.

"I know you, sir!" she called out. "Wait; I will come down."

In another minute she was shaking my hand in the moonlight, her bright face and fashionably-costumed figure looking very pretty in the white beams.

"Thank you a thousand times!" said I. "I have already learned that you are Dick Little's wife."

"Ah! and who could have told you that?" she cried, with another laugh. "But never mind now, since you are in such a hurry. Yes, I am Dick's wife, though I still retain my maiden name of Mattie Collins here in my native place. I would never have had to be ashamed of Dick, either, but for Jesse James, who led him into being the robber that he has become. But I'll yet reform Dick, and have my revenge on the Jameses. Good—by, then. We may meet again."

I spurred away, rejoining Timberlake's rough-riders, by this time increased to a force of more than twenty horsemen, and we at once started in fresh pursuit of the outlaws.

Day was breaking when I found myself alone in a wild forest glade, my horse having gone dead lame, leaving me considerably in the rear of my bettermounted friends.

I had just dismounted, and was leading my horse to a neighboring brook, when I perceived a man who was laving his head in the cool waters, unconscious of my presence.

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My first glance discovered him as one of the outlaws, broken down, tired out, and perhaps wounded besides, his belt and pistols having been thrown wearily aside on the turf bank upon which he was kneeling. My second glance caused me a thrill of satisfaction, for it recognized the man as Bob Younger.

Recollecting what Ford had told me, that my best chance of learning anything about Judge Rideau's grandchild was by questioning Bob Younger, the hope of now discovering the whereabouts of the child occurred to me in a flash.

To steal upon the unsuspecting outlaw, precipitate myself upon him, and have him at my mercy, was the work of but a moment.

"Bob Younger, your life and liberty, now mine, are yours again on one condition!" I exclaimed, with my knee on his chest, and my revolver at his forehead. "Where has Jesse James hidden away the little Tip Younger, Judge Rideau's grandchild?"

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CHAPTER IX. A Secret Seized and Lost -- a Fresh Incentive to Detective Work.

The outlaw, Bob Younger, was at my mercy, but he gave no indications, even with death staring him in the face, of surrendering the precious secret that I demanded.

"Do you take me for a coward?" he growled, looking up at me with haggard, but unquailing eyes. "Yes, you're right. I do know where the little Tip can be found. But blaze away, curse you! You'll never get the secret out of me!"

"It's for the child's own good -- for his moral and worldly welfare!" I exclaimed. "I swear it!"

"You swear it?" was the sneering rejoinder. "Ha, ha! A detective's oath!"

I relieved him of the pressure of my knee, though still keeping my pistol at his head, and threw an added earnestness into my voice that could not but impress him.

"Listen to me, Bob Younger," said I. "I own that I am Judge Rideau's agent in looking up the child. I would rather a hundredfold give you your life than take it. I pledge you my word, as between man and man, that the boy, if given up, will be brought up honestly, even luxuriously, and in the fear of God. He will be educated like a Christian and a gentleman. It will be the making of him, body and soul!"

I saw that my words were having some effect. The outlaw's face had gradually grown grave and anxious.

"If I thought that," he began, in a low voice; "if I were sure of that -- "

At this point there was the crack of a near-at-hand firearm. My head reeled, everything swam before me, and, feeling that I was wounded, I staggered to my feet, with a bitterer sense of disappointment than I can give any idea of.

As I leaned against a tree, pistol in hand, while concealing as best I could the weakness I was in, Cole Younger who had fired the shot, came running into the glade, and helped his brother to his feet. From the fact of his not firing again, I rightly inferred that he had expended his last cartridge, and it soon became apparent that Bob was in

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the same predicament.

I was no longer in a condition to draw a bead on either of them. Had it been otherwise, I would certainly at least have shot down Cole Younger in his tracks, as in duty bound, secret or no secret. As it was, I succeeded in disguising my real state, and making a show of keeping them covered until they had limped off in the forest together, after exchanging some whispered words.

Then, with a feeling of disappointment far more poignant than any physical pain I was suffering — a desolate feeling of having missed my longed-for secret on the very threshold of discovery — I staggered to the edge of the brook and fainted away.

A splashing of the cool water on my head and face revived me in a short time. I found myself under the ministrations of Charley Ford and Jack Gorham, who had been sent back to look after me on my being missed from the main body of pursuers. They had also dressed my wound, and in other ways contributed to my comfort.

Then, as we were nearer Independence than any other town, we proceeded thither. There, at my request, I was placed under the care of old Cynthy, a task which the good creature undertook with more than willingness.

Time proved that the Jameses and their organized followers had suffered more disastrously. Indeed, it was a question whether they were not crippled beyond recovery as a large, compact organization. The Red Cut had been their deathtrap. It had cost them — before the active pursuit was given up — thirteen of their veterans, in killed and wounded and prisoners. Though the James' themselves got off with their usual good luck, together with the Youngers, the Hites, the Millers, Jim Cummings, and a few more of perhaps their most desperate confederates, they sunk into as sudden inactivity and apparent lifelessness as though the earth had swallowed them. I, for one however, knew perfectly well that we were destined to hear from them again; and before long, at that, now that they were driven to desperation.

My wound, though not dangerous, was painful, and forced me to more than a fortnight's rest, with a good deal of nursing, at Aunt Cynthy's.

One day I was surprised and gratified by a visit from Mattie Collins. Her cheerful and attractive presence was like sunshine to me, but she had, notwithstanding, come on serious business.

After a few preliminary words, she said:

"I have had several interviews with my husband since the Red Cut fight, Mr. Lawson, and am here to negotiate in his interest. He wants to desert the robbers, and work right along with you detectives, as Ford and Sheppard have done. All he asks is protection and an assurance of Government pardon. I come to you first in his behalf, because you are the only detective whose personal acquaintance I have made."

"That is right. Has your husband, Dick Little, ever committed an actual murder with his own hand?"

"Never!" she exclaimed, solemnly.

"All right. Why does Dick wish to quit his heretofore confederates?"

"Simply to reform, and through his affection for me. Besides, Dick, with perhaps some others, has long been wearying of the James boys' increasing avarice, and of their habit of burying their stolen treasure."

"Burying their treasure, eh?" said I, instantly, with an eye to business. "This is astounding intelligence."

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"And perhaps not unwelcome from the detective point of view, Mr. Lawson," said Mattie, smiling. "Well, the information shall remain exclusively in your possession with no other detective or official to act upon it, if you will help me in my object."

"That I shall certainly do, and you have my thanks in the bargain," said I, with sudden opening visions of wealth in comparison with which all theretofore offered rewards in a solid lump melted into insignificance. "But what has prevented other members of the gang from inquiring into this matter?"

"Fear-- deadly fear of the Jameses, and especially of Jesse."

"You will say nothing of this to anyone else, and you will keep your husband equally reticent?" said I.

"I swear it!" said Mattie, solemnly. "You can be content. Neither Dick nor I would dare to meddle further with the matter, nor would any member of the gang."

"All right," said I. "Bring Dick Little here with you tomorrow night. I promise him at least safe conduct to and fro for that occasion. I hope, also, to have then secured him the assurance from the authorities that he requires."

Overjoyed at what I said, Mattie departed.

I now had an added string to my bow, of which I had never dreamed before. The restoration of Judge Rideau's grandchild; the lumped rewards for the capture of the Jameses, dead or alive; the buried treasure of the freebooter chief, doubtless amounting to a princely fortune in itself! Could any mortal detective ask for any greater incentive to professional exertion than was furnished by these?

True to her word, Mattie returned on the night of the following day. Dick Little accompanied her. He was an athletic, rather mild-looking fellow for a desperado though with an unmistakable resoluteness of bearing. I could readily understand how he had gradually been made the criminal subordinate of such a character as Jesse James.

Upon entering the inner room of Aunt Cynthy's cabin, accompanied by Mattie, he was surprised, and not a little alarmed, to encounter there, beside myself, both Sheriff Timberlake and Commissioner Craig. We all speedily reassured him, however. I had busied myself industriously in his behalf since Mattie's first visit. We had a promise of conditional pardon in the Governor's own handwriting, to show him, besides the guaranty of our united protection to offer, in case of his bad faith to his confederates coming to their knowledge. The conference ended in a solemn agreement, by which he engaged to serve our interests to the best of his ability; while maintaining a quasi connection with the freebooters up to the last moment. In other words, he was placed on pretty much the same footing as were Charley Ford and George Sheppard.

Little and Mattie remained after the others had departed. The former appreciated the personal efforts I had made in his behalf, and wished to thank me in private. I cut him short by recalling, as an offset, the personal obligation that his wife had put me under to her during the Red Cut affair, but neither he nor Mattie were any the less hearty in their gratitude for that.

"As you doubtless know, Mr. Lawson," said Dick, "I have been contemplating this move for a great while, but, with my natural distrust of the authorities, I would never have got this far but for your assistance. I am indebted to you for having shown me the way back to an honest life. Whatever information of value I shall obtain, in pursuance of this agreement, shall be first communicated to you personally."

"Thanks!" said I. "Has the gang, then, given up the Minnesota bank raid that was projected?"

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"No; it is only delayed indefinitely by reason of this unforeseen disaster at the Red Cut. That cut us up awfully, as you know. However, the bank raid may be revived at any day. Fewer men, I fancy, will engage in it than you suppose. I doubt if there will be half a dozen besides the Jameses and the Youngers."

"Will you be of the number?"

"I hope not, but can't tell. It will be just as Jess decides. His word is law with the gang."

"Now for a different sort of a question," said I, lowering my voice, "Do you have any idea of the general locality of Jesse James' buried treasure?"

Little started, and at once became ill at ease. He looked hesitatingly at his wife, but she kept her eyes castdown, and he got no encouragement from her.

"Perhaps I have a general idea of it," he at length stammered; "but I don't like to think or talk of it. Whenever I do so the air seems full of pistols and knives, with Jesse James' tigerish eyes blinking at me from behind 'em."

I presently succeeded in mitigating his dread, amounting almost to superstition, so that he could at least breathe and talk more freely.

"Is it buried in Cracker Neck, or in the vicinity of this place, think you?" I then asked.

"No; nowhere near here," was the somewhat dogged reply.

"Oh, hang to your secret, by all means," said I.

"It ain't that, Mr. Lawson, and pray don't get out of humor with me," said Little, humbly. "The fact is, I ain't got any secret to hang onto. I do, however, suspect that Jess hides his treasure somewhere in the woods near where I work as a farmhand when not out on any racket with the gang. You know, there's a good many of us in that lay, for the sake of appearances. We can't all of us support the brigand chief character without any special let up, as the Jameses and Youngers can."

Here was something like definiteness at last.

"On what farm do you work?" I asked.

"Four and a half miles out of St. Joe, on the H — ville road. It's a small and lonely farm, and I'm the only hired hand on it. The country round about is a system of wooded hills, even savager and lonesomer than around the Younger or the Samuels homestead. Now, Mr. Lawson, when are you going to be fit for the saddle again?"

"I rode out for the first time to-day, without inconvenience," I replied. "In a week hence I shall be thoroughly myself again."

"Good! Come to me in some sort of disguise, sir, and we'll have a talk. You'll find me working alone in the fields by the road in the middle of the afternoon. I'm certain the Minnesota job won't be undertaken within a week. I shall at least have something to tell you about that, and maybe about something else."

The concluding words were uttered after a pause, and with a certain significance that pleased me. I obtained a few more particulars, and then we separated, Mattie saying, while bidding me goodnight, that she felt lighterhearted on Dick's account than she had for many a day.

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A week later I proceeded to St. Joseph, where I procured a horse and set out to keep my appointment.

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CHAPTER X. A Death-Guarded Secret -- the Minnesota Raid

The country that I traversed was as wild and forbidding as any I had ever seen in Missouri. I at last came upon Little at work in a roadside field. The humble cottage of his employer was in view about a quarter of a mile away, and for loneliness and isolation it might almost as well have been in the heart of Montana or Idaho.

"Hello!" exclaimed Little, looking up, spade in hand, in answer to my greeting. "What! is it indeed you, Mr. Lawson? By Jove! I'd never have known you in that shape."

This was in complimentary allusion to the disguise I had assumed. It was that of a country storekeeper in hard luck, on the lookout for a new location and a partner, with a rather sorry-looking steed in keeping with the character.

"Have you anything to say?" I asked.

"Yes, more than you imagine," was the cautious reply. "Yes, indeed. As soon as you return to St. Joe you can telegraph to your friends that the Minnesota expedition will start from H ville to-morrow at daybreak. The gang will make the entire distance on horseback, and as you fellows will doubtless cover the greater part of it by rail, of course you can take your time with your preparations. Jess has been compelled to move earlier than he intended, by reason of the poverty of the majority of the gang. They have done nothing yet to retrieve the Red Cut failure. Some of 'em are entirely destitute."

"Are you to go?"

"Yes; I have my orders. I will try to communicate with you on the way."

"Who are the others?"

"The entire expedition will consist of the two Jameses, the three Youngers, the two Hites, Curly Pitts, Hank Burke, Bill Shadwell, Charley Miller, and Clem Miller, besides myself. It is a bigger gang than I thought would be used in the affair. Charley Miller is to be the guide. He was a Minnesota horse-thief, you know, before he joined us, and is familiar with that northern country. Ed Miller would also have been picked, but there's bad blood betwixt him and Jess now, though they used to be thick. Only night before last, at the rendezvous down in Cracker's Neck, Ed more than insinuated that Jess and Frank took precious good care of themselves, even with the rest of the gang starving to death. Jess didn't reply then, but we all saw that he didn't like it. Jim Cummings would also have been selected, but he hasn't got over his scorching. Wait, there's one more of the raiding party I haven't named -- Charley White. That's fourteen in all."

Here certainly was a whole budget of news, and important enough in all conscience. If I had had any doubts as to the sincerity of Dick Little's intentions, they were now dissipated by the frankness and fullness with which he gave me these details.

"Clef Miller is a new name to me," I observed. "So is Bill Shadwell."

"They both only recently joined, but have already left records in Texas and the Indian Territory. Clem Miller is a cousin of Charley's."

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While speaking together, we had withdrawn into a fence corner overgrown with alders and papaw trees.

After giving me some further details regarding the intended raid, Little gave me a mysterious look, and said, while lowering his voice:

"There's something else, Mr. Lawson."

"What is it?"

"You're the third man that's passed along this lonesome road to-day, sir. Neither of the two others saw me, for I was digging yonder in the ditch. And I was devilish careful to duck my head as soon as I recognized 'em, you bet. They were about ten minutes apart. The first man, perhaps, didn't know that the other was a-doggie' him. Yet. they both hitched up somewhere up yonder, and disappeared, one after the other, into the thick woods up the mountain side, in mighty nigh the same place."

"Why, Dick, what do you mean by all this mystery?" I asked. "Who were the men?"

He lowered his voice to a hushed, scared sort of tone.

"Mr. Lawson," said he, "the first man was Jess James The man a-doggie' him was Ed Miller."

"Well; what is there to it all?"

"Just this," and Dick's frightened voice sank yet lower. "It looked to me like as Jess was on his way to his treasurehole — perhaps for the purpose of making a new plant there — and like as Ed was shadowin' him, to find out where the hole is. Didn't I tell you about the two having had some words about money night afore last?"

This was a better piece of news than I had dreamed of expecting. It almost startled me. But I was none the less pleased. I at once dismounted, tying my horse in among the papaws, and taking a look at my pistols.

"What are you going to do?" exclaimed Dick.

"Follow up Jess, as his fellow-bandit is following him, of course," I replied, in a businesslike tone. "I also would find the robber's treasure-hole. You shall guide me."

"The thunder I shall!" cried Dick, almost with chattering teeth. "Good Lord! do you think I'm tired of living?"

"I think you're tired of being a blood-thirsty highwayman's blind tool and cat's-paw, if there's any sincerity in your professions," said I. "Nothing venture, nothing have. So, come along."

Much more urging was required to get the better of his fears, but the task was at last accomplished. We then proceeded up the road, and entered the woods at the point where my guide had seen the robbers go into them a short time before, but without seeing where they had first tethered their horses.

However, we made but a slight search for the latter. Our main quest was a much more important one.

After climbing the slope with much difficulty, by reason of both its steepness and the density of its trees and undergrowth, we came out upon an elevated level not quite so thickly wooded.

We had pushed on for a considerable distance further, when the report of firearms suddenly rang through the woods. It was followed quickly by a second report, after which there was dead silence as we came to a

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momentary pause. But at this point, with his spade still in his grip, and his knees knocking together, my guide resolutely refused to go another step.

"Aren't you armed?" I exclaimed, beginning to lose patience.

"Yes," was his sullen answer; and, throwing open his rude farmer's blouse, showing his belt beneath with the pistols in it.

"What ails you, then? The spade in your hands is moreover a deadly weapon. Aren't you ashamed to be paralyzed by a danger, even before it is encountered?"

"No, I'm not; not where Jess James is concerned," he growled, and then laying his hand on my arm with increased trepidation, he whispered: "Hush ! Listen!"

I shook off his grip, laying my hand on my pistol. There was the sound of some one hurrying through the brush not far away, and evidently making down the hill toward the road we had quitted.

"Come on!" I said. "Let us at least see who it is."

We retraced our steps to a point on the brow of the wooded slope whence a view could be obtained of the road below.

A moment later we saw a single horseman galloping off, with a riderless horse in leading. The horseman was Jesse James. He rode so rapidly that in a few seconds he was lost to view.

"Now I'll go on with you," said my guide gloomily, and, turning, he once more led the way back through the woods. "You'll soon see, I'm thinkin', what it costs to meddle with Jess James' private affairs."

I more than half suspected what he meant. We presently came into a narrow glade. A feeble groan attracted our attention, and a brief search revealed a man lying at the edge of the glade. It was Ed Miller, the outlaw, fatally shot through the head, but slowly coming back to momentary consciousness.

We both knelt at his side, Dick supporting his head, while I took one of his hands. The other hand firmly grasped a revolver, from which probably the second shot we had heard had been fired, but unavailingly for either self-defense or vengeance.

"Just as I supposed!" growled Little. "Jess has, like enough, killed him to save the secret of his treasure-hole."

"Yes, yes," gasped the dying robber, in a failing voice. "That was it."

I signed Little to let me do the talking, and he at the same time raised Miller's head a little higher.

"We are friends, my man, who can and will avenge you, if possible," I exclaimed, with sympathetic earnestness. "Only try to answer the questions I shall put to you."

He made a sign in the affirmative, but his eyes were already on the point of glazing, and his breath came in swift, convulsive pants.

"Quick, then!" I went on. "Did you see Jess at the place where he hides away his money?"

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"Yes, yes; saw him dig out hole put a fresh bag in — fill it up again. Cave full of treasure—bags, gold, bags silver, boxes greenbacks, jewels and watches in piles — two hundred thousand dollars, sure! Then he saw me. My first shot missed — then done for."

The words came out in painful jerks, a gush of blood from his lips closing his utterance.

"Try and give us directions!" I exclaimed, hurriedly wiping off the blood and putting my flask to his lips. "Only try — there's a good fellow! We'll use a part of the money in hunting down your murderer. Where is it buried? Quick — give us the clew!"

The dying bandit, though in his last agonies, made a supreme effort, and struggled into a sitting posture. His face was livid, but with the hope of vengeance flaring out through it, as through an expiring lamp. He pointed out through the glade with a trembling hand.

"There, there!" he faltered. "Two buckeyes, three forties, heap stones to right, then a forty-five shot straight on; where ball strikes, dig!"

It was his expiring effort. He fell back a corpse.

"Cashed in!" commented Little. "Poor Ed. There was worse 'uns in the world than he, robber that he was. What are you doin', Mr. Lawson? Not jottin' down them last nonsensical words of his'n? Yes. Blamed if he ain't!"

This was just what I was doing. He had risen to his feet, while I, still stooping, pencil in hand and memorandum-book on knee, was carefully transcribing those dying words, disconnected and meaningless as they seemed to my guide. And I had to confess that, as yet, I could make nothing out of them myself.

"Poor fellow!" said I, at last, as I arose from my task. "As you say, there were probably worse men in the world than he. What shall we do with the body?"

"Leave it alone for the present, at least," said Little, moving away. "But you don't really think that head or tail can ever be twisted out of them last words of Ed's?"

"I can't tell till I try," said I, crossing the forest opening. "Let us look around a bit."

I had hoped to analyze the mysterious directions, whose transcription I still held in my hand, and then follow them up observantly. But I got no further than their very beginning, without coming to a pause, hopelessly at fault.

"Two buckeyes." Yes; there were two buckeye, or horsechestnut trees, right across the glade at the point to which the robber had pointed. No other trees of the kind were to be seen. I stood between them, looking calculatingly off into the woods, but without getting any idea from the remaining directions, which I kept repeating over and over again.

"Two buckeyes, three forties, heap stones to right, then a forty-five shot straight on; where ball strikes, dig.' "

"Well, here we've got our buckeyes at all events," said I, thinking aloud. "Now for the next item -- 'three forties.' What can that mean?"

"It'll be getting dark purty soon, Mr. Lawson," suggested my companion, irrelevantly.

"It won't get dark before I can see if three hundred and forty paces straight ahead shall chance to lead me to a heap of stones," said I, with the memoranda still in my mind's eye. "Come on."

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Dick shrugged his shoulders as he accompanied me, but nothing came of the test. Three hundred and forty paces, straight through the woods from between the two horsecheatnuts, brought us into a tangle of underbrush, without so much as a suggestion of a stone-heap anywhere to be seen.

I made several other attempts, equally futile, to follow out what might be the meaning of the enigmatical directions, and finally gave up the task in despair, at least for the time being.

"Come, Mr. Lawson, let's get out of these woods before nightfall," said Dick, at last inducing me to give up my quest. "Ed must have been loony when he said them last words, and there can't be nothin' into 'em. I'll tell my employer about havin' found a man dead, and he'll come up here some time or other and look after the body."

We returned to the road without meeting any further adventure. Then, upon getting into the saddle again, I made some definite arrangements with him as to the part he was to endeavor to play during the forthcoming raid. I also promised to convey to Mattie Collins a verbal message from him, and we separated.

On returning to St. Joseph I at once telegraphed the information I had received, concerning the raid, to my confederates in Kansas City and Independence, making use of a cipher that was intelligible to us alone. Then, knowing that they would at once set on foot the necessary preparations, I sought a tavern for the rest and repose of which I was greatly in need.

It was perhaps natural that I was in a despondent frame of mind.

"So," thought I to myself, just before sin-king to sleep that night, "another great secret has suddenly fluttered from me, like a wounded bird, just at the instant that it was in my closing grasp. Bob Younger's revelation, concerning the stolen boy, was almost in my possession, when a bullet cut it short. In like manner I have just been robbed of this fortunedisclosing secret by another bullet, though in a different way. It is infernally hard luck."

Presently however, something seemed to whisper encouragingly to me.

"Courage," the still small voice seemed to say. "As a bullet has robbed you of these secrets, one after another, so shall they be eventually revealed to you by a bullet in each instance."

Then I sank to sleep, and dreamed all night of deciphering mysterious writings and unearthing enormous treasures.

On a certain bright autumnal morning, not long after this, our small but determined detective force was gathered in the little village of R-- , a suburb of the town of Northfield, Minnesota.

We had ridden over to R-- from the nearest rail road point at an early hour that morning, and were now waiting to receive a final notification of the raiding robbers' advance from the southward, before riding into Northfield, and notifying the bank and municipal officers of the threatened descent. We had resolved to refrain from doing this up to the very last moment for a number of reasons. In the first place we were anxious to allay premature excitement, and thus get the robbers well into the town, in the hope of killing or bagging them all. In the second place, we had such confidence in our arrangements that we felt sure we could give timely warning even at the last moment, without costing the unsuspecting citizens the loss of a man, or the bank the loss of a dollar. And finally, we knew enough of the Minnesotian character to be sure of securing ample backing, at a pinch, either for hard fighting or in an organized pursuit, and on mighty short notice at that.

In one of these respects it turned out that we had made a grave mistake, as events will prove.

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We had, thus far, received three secret telegrams from Dick Little, faithfully notifying of the progress of the robber band from time to time. We had now been waiting for the fourth and last communication for several hours, and were growing both impatient and anxious.

Neither Sheriff Timberlake nor Captain Craig was with us on this occasion, on account of the field of operations being shifted so far out of their State limits. Our troop, eight in number, was composed of professional detectives, with the exception of George Sheppard and Charley Ford, and I had been elected to the chief command.

At last we received our notification, but in an unexpected way.

At about noon a horseman, covered with dust, came tearing into the tavern stableyard, where we were all in waiting with our mounts in readiness.

The horseman was Dick Little.

"Quick, or it's too late!" he gasped. "I'm supposed to be laid up seriously wounded by an accidental shot. I couldn't find another telegraphic station, so here I am. I started for this place as soon as the gang quitted B-- . They're hurrying up from the south. Go on without me, Lawson. Quick, quick! Maybe they're already at the bank."

I waited for nothing more. Away we dashed, leaving Little behind.

Northfield was only a mile to the south, but the road seemed to merely crawl under us, though we were going at a thundering pace. Gorham chanced to be the best mounted, and I ordered him to spur on in advance, and give the general alarm.

This duty he performed. It chanced to be in the midst of the prairie chicken season, when everybody coming to town was armed with a shotgun or rifle. Gorham's preliminary alarm, therefore, was instantly taken up by good men and true, in a condition to act upon it. But, nevertheless, as the rest of us came rushing into the excited town from the north, Jesse James and his outlaws had already entered it from the south, and were even at the door of the bank.

They had come rushing in their usual style, which had often proved so successful before -- firing off their pistols, making their horses plunge and rear, yelling at the top of their voices, and with similar demos/rations.

They reined up at the bank doors, and, while the rest remained in the saddle, Jesse and Frank James and Cole Younger leaped from their horses, and dashed into the interior.

Cashier Haywood bravely refused to open the vault, even at the mouth of the pistol. He was instantly shot dead by Jesse, while the latter's confederates opened fire upon the remaining clerks, though purposely wounding instead of killing them outright. Then Jesse marched the cashier's assistant up to the safe doors, with his still smoking pistol at his ear, and ordered him to open them.

The poor fellow, with his superior lying dead at his feet, was probably doing the best he could toward obeying the order, when the exchange of shots outside the bank became so violent and frequent as to distract the attention of the outlaws within.

And just then Wood Hite rode his horse half way into the bank with horror and dismay depicted on his face.

"Come out of that, Jess, if you care for your hide!" he yelled. "The game's up! We're hemmed in with the bull town agin us!"

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With a terrible oath of fury and disappointment, the outlaw leader knocked the clerk senseless with a blow from his revolver and fired a parting shot into the cashier's body as he turned to make his escape.

Then, followed by his brother and Cole Younger, he rushed out of the bank.

A wild scene of carnage met his gaze. His men still held the approach to the bank, and were defending themselves desperately, but shots were being poured into them from every direction, while the accompanying shouts, curses, and yells were like a massacre.

"Stand to it!" shouted Jesse's undaunted voice. "We'll be hanged if we're caught alive! Stand to it!"

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CHAPTER XI. A Black Day for the Outlaws -- Bob Younger's Secret

But there was no "standing to it" for more than a few moments. That would have been beyond human, or even outlaw, endurance.

Bob Younger had a bullet in his mouth, Hank Burke a load of bird shot in the shoulder, and Charley Miller was on foot, fighting desperately for another man's horse, his own having been shot dead beneath him. The bullets flew like rain. Horsemen were careering frantically hither and thither in a circumscribed, fireenvironed space that was rapidly becoming a slaughterpen.

Frank James was shot through the thigh with his foot in the stirrup, and had to be assisted in the saddle by his brother. And the latter was no sooner remounted than Clem Miller was shot dead out of his saddle by a rifle from the court-house window opposite, while at the same time Bill Shadwell went to grass with the top of his head blown away. Both of the Hites and Charley White had been wounded at the outset; and, as the outlaw leader threw his leg over his big sorrel, and thundered out the order for flight, Curly Pitts also hid away a bullet in his shoulder, which, however, he was able to carry off with him for the time being.

Then, with the exception of the two lying dead on the ground, they rushed away on the back track, with the entire maddened population at their heels, at least for a considerable distance.

It was at this juncture that my men and I came dashing up from the other side of the town. Everything happened in less than five minutes. Through our fatal mistake in our calculations, combined with the headstrong fury of the townspeople and other causes, our plan for bagging the outlaws and saving innocent bloodshed -- had fatally miscarried. Nevertheless, we could repair the mischief in a measure by organizing pursuit. This was effected almost instantly, and it was at the head of more than thirty horsemen that, a few minutes later, I hung upon the rear of the fleeing banditti.

Jess, the outlaw, had underrated the character of the Minnesotians -- had, in other words, found them very much of his own sort with the criminal element left out. And away up there in the Northwest, far from his familiar haunts, he had met with a discomfiture that was to prove even more bloody and disastrous than his Red Cut defeat.

However, the gang had taken care to make their attack with perfectly fresh horses, which were no small advantage to them in their flight. We, nevertheless, held our own in the pursuit. Soon after midday they made a temporary stand in a rocky defile of the road, where we could not attack them to advantage

However, in the brief skirmish at the mouth of the pass, I had the semi-satisfaction of drawing a bead on Jesse

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James with my Winchester. He was compelled to rein his horse into a rear to save himself from the shot. But he did so at the expense of his peerless steed, Dancer receiving the bullet in his noble breast, and falling dead in the road. Though his master at once vaulted on the back of a spare animal, and continued to organize his flight with unabated vigor, I could imagine the regret with which he left his beautiful sorrel motionless on the road.

Our pursuit was kept up all that afternoon and late into the night. We pressed the outlaws so closely that they did not venture to force relays from the roadside farmers. Such an interruption of their flight would have brought them to a fight at close quarters, which would doubtless have resulted in the destruction of the entire gang. We, on the contrary, could take our time in the matter of relays, which were freely, even eagerly, furnished, and this gave us a great advantage toward the end of the race.

However, though less than half a mile behind the fugitives, we came, as night was falling, at a fork in the dusty road, where we were momentarily at fault. Both roads seemed equally trampled, the heavy dust muffled the fugitive hoof-beats, and we were at a loss as to which one had been selected by the robbers.

"I have it!" at last cried Gorham, who had been studying the roads at their forking with an old trapper's scrutiny. "Look!"

He pointed to a streak, dotted and irregular, that veined the dust of one of the roads, and continued on and away until lost in the—gathering shadows, while the road forking away from it showed no such indication.

"It's blood — life-blood sprinkling from the deathwound of some one of the gang!" he cried. "Come on!"

So once again we dashed forward, tracking our prey by its blood, as the tiger is sometimes tracked in the jungle while trailing the hunter's spear in its side.

But this discovery on the part of Gorham, nevertheless, lost us the two chief fugitives that it was most desirous to capture or kill. I do not see how it could have been otherwise, under the circumstances, but it prevented us from dividing our force at the fork of the roads, where such a disposition would have had a sweeping result, which only became partial by our remaining together.

I will relate as briefly as possible how this came to pass.

When the fugitive robbers had approached the fork, at which our mistake was made, it became noticeable that they were leaving a trail of blood by which they might be tracked, in spite of the closing in of night for a bright moonlight was in prospect. The blood was from but one of their number. This was John Younger, who had received a wound severing an artery of the leg, during the momentary stand in the rocky pass. It could not be effectually stanch'd, though he still managed to keep his saddle, with the aid of lashings, and with his brothers riding on either side of him.

The Hites, Charley White, Curly Pitts, Hank Burke, and Frank James had also received shots — the latter a most serious one — but had thus far succeeded in stuffing their clothing into their wounds, and riding on without the sprinkling of any ruddy reminders by the way. John Younger was the only one who bled, and his misfortune threatened to lead to the capture or destruction of the entire band.

It was on this account that Jesse, the outlaw, ordered a momentary halt at the fork of the roads, where he coolly proposed to put John Younger to death in the general interest, so that the flight could be no longer tracked by the telltale drops.

But Cole Younger had at once drawn his revolver and threatened to kill the first man who should offer to do his brother further harm.

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"But, curse it all, Cole, it's for the good of the gang," said Jesse.

"Good or no good," cried Cole, cocking his pistol "the man that first draws on my disabled brother dies in his tracks!"

"You bet!" mumbled Bob Younger, with half his teeth gone from the bullet that had traversed them. "Murder in the gang sha'n't commence in the Younger family, Jess."

The majority of the band seeming to side with the three brothers, Jesse swore that his brother Frank and he would separate from the others. This the twain at once put into execution by galloping off on the road to the left, while the Youngers and the rest of the band took the road that we were induced to follow in the manner alluded to.

It was in this way that the Jameses managed to elude our pursuit where a division of our force would have perhaps included them in the captures that followed.

It was late at night when we at last brought our worn-out fugitives to a compulsory stand in the bright moonlight It was at a wildly picturesque spot, where the road crossed a brook over a rude stone arch, with a ruined mill not far o~ to the right, and where the comparatively open country offered them no sort of cover. Four of their horses had already dropped dead with fatigue, and there wasn't a furlong of go left in the remainder.

Nevertheless the gang drew up across the road, and showed a desperate front. It melted to nothing almost instantly before the rain of bullets that we sent in among them, and in the merciless charge with which we followed up the volley.

The two Hites managed to gain a rather distant thicket, under cover of the smoke and confusion, and were seen no more. But Curly Pitts fell dead; Hank Burke was likewise dispatched, while creeping on all fours, with a knife in his teeth and murder in his heart toward one of our men who had been wounded and unhorsed; Charley Miller and Charley White were shot to pieces almost at the same instant, and then the three Youngers, riddled with bullets, were left. With their dead horses for a breastworks they continued to fight while consciousness remained to them.

After the fight was over, however, and when the majority of my men were galloping toward the thicket, in which they doubtless thought that the Jameses had found a refuge as well as the Hites, I suddenly missed Bob Younger, whom I had until then steadily kept in view.

I questioned Gorham and Ford. They were engaged in stanching the wounds of John and Cole Younger, preparatory to shackling them, while the rest of our men who had not galloped away were examining the dead outlaws with a view to their identification.

"Bob's somewhere near at hand, Lawson," said Ford. "Or he may have crawled down to the brook to die."

Sure enough, I found the man I was seeking at the water's brink, and just under the arch of the bridge. Wounded in eight places, he had felt his way thither with a last effort, but had fainted away at the margin without obtaining the cooling draught that he had so thirstily craved.

I at once began to minister to him. A dash of water on the face and head brought a- return of consciousness. Then a deep draught of the same, which I administered with my scooped hands, still further revived him. I then raved his wounds, one after the other bandaged them as well as I could -- my own shirt, torn into strips, furnishing the material -- and had the satisfaction of seeing that he appreciated and was grateful for my attentions.

"Bob -- Bob Younger!" I whispered at last; "do you recognize me?"

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The moonlight was flooding both our faces, for I had dragged him out from under the arch. He managed to give a slight nod in the affirmative.

"Will you not now tell me what you were once on the point of telling me?" I went on, eagerly. "Remember, it is solely for the child's good. I swear it! Let me have the secret of his whereabouts. He will be reared into being an honest man and a gentleman. What will be, what can be, the future of your dead brother's little orphan, if left to the ordering of such a man as Jesse James?"

The wounded outlaw closed his eyes, and for two or three seconds he seemed to be turning something over and over in his mind.

He signed me to bend nearer to him. I did so. The next instant the secret was mine, and in less than ten words.

I started up in astonishment. Some of my men at that moment came down the bank in search of me, and Bob Younger was carried away to keep his brothers company.

Then the rest of our band came dropping back into the road, one by one, with the discouraging report that they had succeeded in making no further captures. We had, moreover, been given to understand before this that neither Jesse nor Frank James had been with the outlaws at their final stand.

I will be brief in summing up the results of the raid. The three Youngers eventually recovered from their wounds, were tried, convicted, and sentenced to the Minnesota State prison for life. The Hites managed to get out of the country. Their usual luck attended the two Jameses in their flight. Brothers in crime as in blood, they clung together with a tenacity worthy of a better cause, Jesse, the younger and abler, aiding his wounded brother, and piloting the way through their long and arduous journey in search of the rest and liberty that neither of them deserved. Frank recovered from his wound.

Of the raiding band, other than Dick Little and the exceptions noted in the last two paragraphs, not one survived. The Northfield expedition had proved a dark and bloody blunder for the James gang.

As soon as I returned to Kansas City I made all haste to Independence. I didn't pause even for a little good natured crowing at the expense of certain other officials, by reason of the rewards attaching to the capture of the Youngers and the killing of their confederates which they had missed and I had shared. For me there was no other thought or consideration just then for anything else than the speedy utilization of the secret I had obtained from Bob Younger, in the recovery and restoration of Judge Rideau's grandchild.

"What do you think, auntie?" I said to old Cynthy, as I entered her cabin, which I intended to make my base of operations until I should have accomplished this object. "What will you say when I tell you that within two or three days I shall bring poor Blanche's child, the little Tip Younger, to you for identification?"

"What'd I say, cunnel?" said Cynthy, rolling up her eyes incredulously, but none the less delighted to see me back safe and sound, once more. "Why, bress de Lor'! I say dat de good luck you's had in Mynnysoty hate done got de tees' ob you, cunnel -- cat's all."

"Nevertheless, I shall do as I have said," I continued, laughing. "Stubborn as you are in your disbelief, I shall yet see you acknowledge that Tip is alive, and with the little fellow folded to your breast."

However, the event proved me to be somewhat oversanguine.

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CHAPTER XII. A Long Quest Drawing to a Close

Mattie came to see me three days later.

She brought me the unexpected and welcome information that Mrs. Younger, her daughters, the twins, and her servants were all quartered for the time being upon the Widow Samuels' farm, in Clay County, not very far away.

I thanked Mattie and, as she quitted me she told me to be on the lookout for Jesse James' intentions, at which I only laughed.

On the following day I resumed my peddler's disguise and directed my steps toward the Widow Samuels' homestead.

I had an interview with Mattie Collins and Dick Little just before starting.

The interview was taking place in Cynthy's cabin, whither my visitors had come early that morning in disguise. At a sign from her husband, Mattie retired from the room, after pressing my hand in token of godspeed and farewell.

"Before you go, Mr. Lawson," said Little, feelingly, "I want to say how much obliged to you I am -- in addition, you know."

"For what?"

"For promising to let up on me altogether on that buried treasure racket, of course. Oh, it's taken a load off my future, I can tell you! It's like plowing over an old ghost-haunted churchyard, and relievin' the farmers' boys near it of a specter of vengeance and fear that's been a-threatenin' of 'em for years. No more of that infernal fear hangin' an' darkenin' over me, sleepin' an' awake! But there's one last thing that I want to say about the treasure."

"Go on."

"It's just this, that you're the only man that knows of its being in existence, so far as I am concerned. And then, again, no other detective'll ever be any wiser through me. Then, again, not one of the gang themselves outside of Jess James and perhaps, Frank James, knows as much about that treasure secret as you do at this day, through those dying words of Ed Miller, whose curiosity lost him his life. As for me, I wash my hands of the whole thing, the Lord be thanked, with your permission. You're the sole outsider possessin' henceforth a clew to Jess James' buried heap -- the sole, single, only possessor of poor Ed Miller's directions -- for what they're worth -- and if any one ever unearths it in the future, with Jess James alive or dead, you ought to be the man. There's an awful pile of lucre hidden away somewhere in the old crust. May you live to get it."

"Thank you, Dick; and I only hope I may," said I.

"However, as you say, with Jesse James alive or dead, it's a romantic sum worth toiling for in the future, and such shall be my care."

I then went on my way.

I hadn't thought it worth while to acquaint Dick and Mattie with all my arrangements for the expedition that was under way. In the first place, Jack Gorham and George Sheppard had engaged to lie in wait for me all day, with a spare horse, in the dense woods that began skirting the road about half a mile west of Mrs. Samuels' house. A system of signals had been agreed on between us. There were certain other arrangements I had made, which I had

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been careful to keep to myself. The way in which Mattie Collins, especially, paid me back for the suspicious distrust on my part will presently appear.

Mrs. Samuels' house was thirty odd miles east of Kansas City, in the wildest part of Clay County. As I had started early, and managed to get good "lifts" on the way, I reached the lonely homestead, with my peddler's pack, at about noon.

It looked more desolate and forbidding than ever. Except for the dogs, whose barking greeted my approach, the place seemed wholly deserted. But Mrs. Samuels -- looking as brave, as stern, and as secret as ever, notwithstanding the mere pitiful stump that was left of one of her hands -- presently appeared on the porch and ordered me away.

I told her, in the servile peddler's dialect, that I assumed for the occasion, that I had ventured to call for the purpose of exhibiting my wares to some ladies who had honored me with their custom in the past, and who I had been told were stopping at her house.

"I suppose he means Mrs. Younger and the rest," said Mrs. Samuels, turning doubtfully to her daughter, who also came upon the porch at that moment

Before the latter could reply, still another young lady bounced energetically into view and frowningly confronted me.

"I wouldn't care for that, if I were you, Mrs. Samuels!" she snapped out spitefully. "You can't be too careful about strangers at the present time. Send the sneaking Jew about his business."

Imagine my surprise -- which the reader will readily share at recognizing in this energetic and seemingly skillful young lady -- Mattie Collins!

Then, as if the house had been-- full of spellbound feminines, only requiring my approach as a signal for bursting into life, activity, eavesdropping, and the like, "Mrs. Younger and the rest" came popping out of the house one after the other.

"Aha, it's the Jew peddler!" exclaimed Mrs. Younger, fixing a suspicious look upon me.

"Yesh, m'am, at your shervice," I responded, bowing and scraping, after relieving myself of my pack.

"How did you learn that we were over here? Come, I want to know!"

The sense of suspicion in the air deepened. Even Mattie, intent upon the part she was acting, did not venture to throw me a reassuring look.

"It ish no difference how I finds you out, Mishus Younger, shince I haff finds you out," I replied. "I hash shust gome vrom Minneshota on pizness, und I hash somedings for you."

"From Minnesota?"

I saw her change color, while her eldest daughter hurried away to hide her emotion. The news had only been made public, the day before, of the conviction of the three Younger brothers, and their sentence to the Minnesota State Prison for life.

I took a small package from my breast and respectfully handed it to the unfortunate mother of the criminals.

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"Pob Younker recognized me among de spiegadors ad de trial, matam," said I. "He cold me to carry dese dings do hish olt mudder, ant I she vot I would do shot."

The package had really been given by Bob Younger to Captain Craig, who had attended the trial, and the captain, at my earnest request, had afterward intrusted me with its delivery.

Mrs. Younger and her daughters opened the package with streaming eyes. It contained three silk pocket handkerchiefs, the farewell tokens of the three robber sons and brothers, before disappearing forever from the world's freedom and sunshine, and a son's Christian name had been lovingly worked in a corner of each by the mother, whose Christmas gifts they had been.

But scant time was afforded me to complete this touching scene.

There came once again the sound of childish laughter and oaths, mingled with the scampering of light hoofs, and then the precocious Younger twins, booted, spurred, and weaponed, came clattering around from the side of the house.

It was almost an exact repetition of the scene I saw on a previous visit, the presence of their elders not having the slightest mitigating effect upon their misbehavior.

"Hi, hi! here's Sheeny again," squeaked one. "Betcher ten cents, Bud, I can hit the bull's-eye first!"

"Betcher ten cents you can't, glossy!" clacked the other.

Then pop, pop! from their little pistols, with the pealike bullets embedding themselves in my pack.

But I had another part to play now, and was not disposed to be so complacent as I had been

"Here, poys, dot's a plenty off dot sort off dom vooley!" I cried, darting suddenly up to them, and snatching the barkers out of their hands. "Mebbe you don't sometimes know goot manners mit oder yolk's property."

"Gimme my pistol, you blasted pork-shirker! I'll wring your neck," piped Bud, like a tempest in a teapot

"Run for our shotgun, Bud!" shrilled his companion; in a wild fury, despite his tender years. "Blast the old crucifier! we'll fill him full of holes."

I merely shrugged my shoulders, and, turning with a bow to Mrs. Younger, who had by this time mastered her emotion, handed the pistols to her, while pointing deprecatingly to my perforated pack. I had already won the old lady's transient good-will, while even old Mrs. Samuels seemed to regard me less sternly than at the outset.

"Take yourself off this instant, both of you!" called out Mrs. Younger, with a certain ring to her voice that momentarily awed the little imps. "And if I hear the snap of another cartridge from either of you, it will be to your cost -- mark that!"

If she had only included the utterance of profanity in her injunction, how much better it would have sounded, was my mental comment.

"Go along with you!" she continued, adding, as they reluctantly turned tail, and spurred out of sight, while discontentedly shaking their heads; "you, Bud, especially, ought to know better. Do you forget that you're to take a long journey this afternoon, perhaps never to come back again?"

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I gave an involuntary start at this piece of information, which concerned me and my plans profoundly. But all will presently be made clear.

The twins being gone, I began opening my pack on the lower step of the piazza, and the women engaged in a lowvoiced discussion back near the door. I correctly surmised them to be merely discussing whether it would be safe to invite me to dinner, in view of the kindness I had done Mrs. Younger. While it was going on, Mattie Collins, under pretense of stooping to examine my wares, found opportunity to whisper something in my ear.

"Jess is here in the house now -- asleep, after many exposures," she whispered. "Be wary. I will try and communicate with you again."

So here was another item which linked well with its forerunner. If the precocious Bud was to attempt a long journey, perhaps never to return, Jesse was evidently to carry him off. The secret of the child's identity and whereabouts had been revealed to me by Bob Younger in the shadow of the bridge under which he lay wounded almost to death, in less than ten words, as I observed before. Those words were: "Tip is one of the twins -- the lighter one."

In plain language, the pseudo twins were not twins at all. Bloss, the darker, being, in reality, the uncle of Bud (Tip), the lighter; the similarity of their ages and a vague family resemblance having aided the deception, carried out successfully from the children's babyhood at Jesse James' suggestion, as the most presentable plan for baffling the search that it was more than suspected Judge Rideau would set on foot.

The discussion at the back of the piazza resulted at last in my being invited to dinner.

It was a solemn and uneasy repast. Even while eating I was constantly an object of distrust, especially on the part of Mrs. Samuels, who would, now and then, bewail the absence of her sons, or express her wonder at their whereabouts. She was careful not to overdo it; likewise, many years of practice having rendered her an adept in deceptions of this sort. Mrs. Younger, in the meantime, kept the "twins" in order, a task which she could perform with an iron hand when necessary. The others at the table ate in silence, with the exception of Mattie, who outwardly manifested a dislike for me amounting to positive repugnance.

She made several allusions to her not being accustomed to sit at table with "Jews," "peddlers," "Sheenies," and the like, all of which were received by me with becoming meekness. For my own information, I discovered, to my surprise, that she was not only well acquainted with both families, but was also a trusted favorite with them all. She had galloped over from Independence by another road than the one I had more laboriously pursued, ostensibly to bear a message from Dick Little concerning some affair of the gang, but really, of course, for the purpose of seconding my plans.

After dinner I shuffled my way out to take a smoke on a little shaded porch back of the great kitchen in which we had been eating.

While thus engaged, and while the women and girls had dispersed, or were busying themselves with various duties, Mattie, with many frowning airs, found an opportunity to slip to my side.

"Jess will carry off the boy as soon as he wakes up-- in an hour or two," she whispered. "He is alone, not one of the gang being within supporting distance. He will take the road down through the forest. Don't hesitate to waylay him and demand the boy, pistol in hand -- that is, if you are thoroughly prepared."

I gave her an assuring glance, and then one of inquiry.

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"Don't hesitate, I tell you," she continued, hurriedly. "For once the panther shall be fronted, claw-clipped, and fangless."

Leaving me to make the most of this rather enigmatical remark, she at once began to abuse me, on general anti-Hebraic principles, in unmeasured terms, until at last I fled for refuge to the front of the house, followed by the titterings of those who overheard her.

"I von't sthay in de brace anoder zingle momend!" I exclaimed, beginning to pack my wares with indignant haste. "dot for you cakes me all de vile, ony way? Py Shimmenies! I no zells nodings avter such dreatments. Owel ride!"

But they had all followed me out on the piazza, and Mrs. Younger, who was still feeling grateful to me, insisted that I should reopen my pack for her inspection.

I only permitted myself to be persuaded after a good deal of coaxing, disposed of a few trifling articles, and then took my departure, apparently still chafing moodily over the abuse which Mattie had heaped upon me so unstintedly.

"Good-by, Sheeny!" she called out, mockingly; adding derisively, as she turned to her companions: "I'd bet my bonnet that the old hypocrite will take his after-dinner snooze down in the hollow, opposite the Red Rocks! He's far lazier than he pretends to be."

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CHAPTER XIII. Jesse, the Outlaw, at Bay

I was not slow to take the hint that was thus thrown out to me.

The Red Rocks constituted a wild and precipitous part of the road where it hollowed down among the woods and hills at the very point near which I knew my friends to be lying ambuscaded.

I did, indeed, make a pause there, as Mattie had satirically wagered, but not for an after-dinner snooze, or to be caught napping, as her companions might have interpreted her meaning.

I merely extended myself by the side of the road, with my pack for a pillow, and, pretending to drowse, patiently waited.

In about an hour there came the tramp of hoofs from the direction of the farm. To my great satisfaction, I perceived that there was but one horse, Jesse James bestriding him, with the fairer of the boys before him.

"Hello, there's Sheeny again!" yelled the little ruffian. "Kill him, Jess! He took my pistol away from me."

"He, he, he!" I chuckled, coming out into the road as the horse was reined up, and pretending to be greatly amused. "Yesh, my little poy, I took de bistol avay because you vas naughdy. But I ish got somedings nicer in my pack for you."

"Stand aside!" growled Jesse. "I've no time to palaver with you now."

Nevertheless, as the lad kicked and struggled, insisting that I should be permitted to make him a present, the kindly glance of the outlaw testified to the genuineness of his fondness for the lad.

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"It is such a nice leetle poy, Mister Shames," said I. "How vos dot bistol vot I soft to you von time?"

"It's a good one, Sheenyy," said Jesse, slapping his belt, which bristled with revolvers of different patterns. "Here, you young rascal, what are you up to?"

This last was to Tip, as I shall hereafter call the boy, who at that moment, wriggling out of his grasp and slipping down from the horse, came running toward me.

"Give the rascal what you've got for him, then, Sheeny, and be lively about it," continued the outlaw, with an impatient laugh. "I've let the little devil ride over me rough-shod till he thinks -- hello! what do you mean?"

I had suddenly snatched the boy to my side with my left hand, drawn my revolver with my right, and was "covering" him.

"It means just this!" cried I, in my natural voice, "Judge Rideau wants this grandchild of his, and my search for him, though a long and perilous one, is ended at last. Jesse James, throw up your hands and crawl out of that saddle, or I'll cheat the hangman of his due!"

I apparently had him dead, as the saying goes. I was probably the only living man who had ever got "the drop" on Jesse, the outlaw.

But he didn't weaken a hair's breadth. Quick as a flash his hand flew to his belt, and at the same instant I fired.

The shot struck him fairly in the breast, but without even discommoding him, and then he had me covered in my turn, with his finger on the trigger and a leer of demonical triumph in his eye.

Then I made sure of something that had theretofore been but vaguely rumored -- that Jesse James wore defensive armor under his clothing -- that, in fact, he was as much coward as he was assassin and robber.

Crack!! went his revolver, directed by the murderous eye that had never been known to miss its deliberate aim, and I, too, stood unharmed.

Then I knew that Mattie must have succeeded in rendering the charges of his pistols harmless during his sleep.

"Cowardly bravo!" I shouted, drawing my second bead on him. "Your headpiece, at least, is unprotected by hidden armor!"

He reared his horse, though, at the instant of my firing, and the animal went down under the bullet intended for his master.

As Jesse went down with the horse, he emptied the remaining chambers of his revolver at me, but with no more effect than the first.

Then, doubtless, realizing that the weapon had been tampered with, he hurled it at my head, drew and leveled another with the rapidity of thought, and disengaged himself from the fallen horses as if by magic.

At this instant the child, tearing himself from my grasp, ran between us, and straight toward the outlaw, screaming for protection.

Jesse gathered the little fellow up under his left arm, but, in doing so, his new aim was disarranged.

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I at once got in another shot -- likewise without effect, since it struck him on the breast -- and sounded the signal for my friends.

Crack! crack! crack! spoke the robber's fresh revolver, as Gorham and Sheppard burst out of the wood at my back, with the spare horse following them, but never a bullet accompanied the brimstone utterance.

"Curse ye all!" yelled the outlaw. "D'ye think any power on earth can corner Jesse James?"

As he spoke he brandished his useless pistol in our faces, caught up the child aloft with his left hand, after the manner of a Rolla in the play, and darted backward up the steep rocks behind him. In this remarkable attitude, and with the child's body protecting his head and face, he scaled them with incredible rapidity, our shots having no effect on him whatever.

"Fire at his head or cripple him!" I yelled. "The cowardly cur is ironclad under his shirt!"

But there was imminent danger of killing the child while aiming at the outlaw's head, and thus far we had not succeeded in hitting him in the lower extremities.

Just then Jesse reached the summit of the rocks.

"I know you now, Bill Lawson!" he shouted, shaking the terrified boy aloft. "I'd die before I'd part with this boy! Tell Judge Rideau that he shall never have him -- not for all the gold he's worth. Tell him "

But at this instant I took the risk and fired.

My bullet broke the wrist that upheld the boy. The latter, with a scream, came falling down the precipice, after a mad but ineffectual effort on the part of Jesse to catch him, and George Sheppard spurred up to the foot of the cliff just in time to catch the light body, uninjured in his arms.

The baffled outlaw gave a sort of roar, like that of a wounded wild beast, and the face that he turned toward us, with his clenched hands -- one of them now helpless -- brushed against his temples, was the most wrathful and demoniac that could be conceived of. No need now to surmise the genuineness of his love for the perverted child that we had at last torn from his savage embrace.

Despair and suffering, equally with wrath and hate, were the ingredients of that terrible expression which his face presented to us at parting.

He suddenly tore a great fragment from the heap of rocks around him with one hand -- his muscular power was on a par with his activity -- and hurled it down at us. Then, as we easily dodged the flying mass, emptying our revolvers ineffectually at him as we did so, he sprang back among the trees and bushes fringing the edge of the precipice, and disappeared.

"Quick, boys!" I exclaimed, springing on the horse that had been provided for me, and taking Tip before me, in spite of his screams and kicks. "So far so good. But the noise of the firing must have reached the farmhouse, and the women of these families, as you know, are as good fighters as the men."

"True for you, Lawson!" said Sheppard, as we began to move off. "And the worst of it is that we can't fight the women as we would the men. It doesn't look right."

My apprehensions were verified in an instant. Just as we struck into a trot, there was the crack of a rifle behind us, and a bullet whistled over our heads.

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We turned to see the women of the farmhouse clustering at the head of the hollow, with Mrs. Samuels and Mrs. Younger at their head, rifles in hand. But, as they were all on foot, we only laughed at their demonstration, and were soon beyond the reach of their bullets, however well directed.

The last we saw of them was when we had reached a rise in the road at a point whence we could look back upon the scene of our recent skirmish. The scene then presented to us was rather amusing than otherwise. The women and girls (Mattie among them) were gathered disconsolately in the hollow; but Bloss, the enthusiastic remaining "twin," was also there, and, having ripped up my abandoned pack with his infantile bowieknife, was "going for" its multifarious but not very valuable contents with the zest of an uncaged monkey in the pantry.

Tip continued to kick and squall, and would doubtless have proved even less unmanageable, could he have seen or suspected the delectable occupation of his late companion in deviltry. But he soon tired himself out. Before we reached the end of our journey, he even began to listen with wonder and curiosity to what I poured into his ears about his real name, parentage, and extraction, and the splendid home that was waiting for him in his grandfather's house.

"Well, by jingo!" exclaimed the ax-outlaw, George Sheppard, when we were well on our homeward way, "when I was in the gang, there used to be some sidewhisperin' about Jess' bearin' a charmed life, but I never expected then to find out how it was. Charmed, indeed! You bet! Mebbe that bullet of mine in the neck struck just a leetle too low down -- say, on the hard rim of a steel undershirt, or somethin' of the sort."

"He was protected by something of the kind to-day, sure as a gun!" said Jack Gorham. "But Jess can't always be provided in that way. I've known men who have seen him go in a-swimmin' directly after a hard scrimmage, with bullets thick'n bees at a swarmin', and nothing of that kind was noticed on him. I fancy he merely takes to concealed armor occasionally, when he thinks there's danger of his being tackled by odds, with none of his gang at his back."

I was also of this opinion. We all agreed, however, that Jesse James had been singularly fortunate in taking his precaution on that day in particular. It had proved his sole offset to the trick that had been played upon him by Mattie Collins in my interest.

It was long after dark when we returned to Independence. But I at once telegraphed to Judge Rideau, requesting him to come on from Booneville at the earliest moment. Then, seeking apartments at the hotel, I sent for Aunt Cynthy, who came to me without delay.

Cynthy's incredulity gave way to rapture, and her identification of the lost one found was immediate and complete. Judge Rideau arrived on the following day. Tip, in a much better humor, was at once placed in his charge. I received my promised reward, in which both Gorham and Sheppard steadfastly refused to share, an act of kind feeling on their part which I never forgot, and which I was happily enabled to reciprocate in kind at a subsequent period. Aunt Cynthy was also rewarded, and taken into the judge's service. Accompanied by her and his new-found grandchild, the old gentleman returned to Booneville on the same day.

THE END.