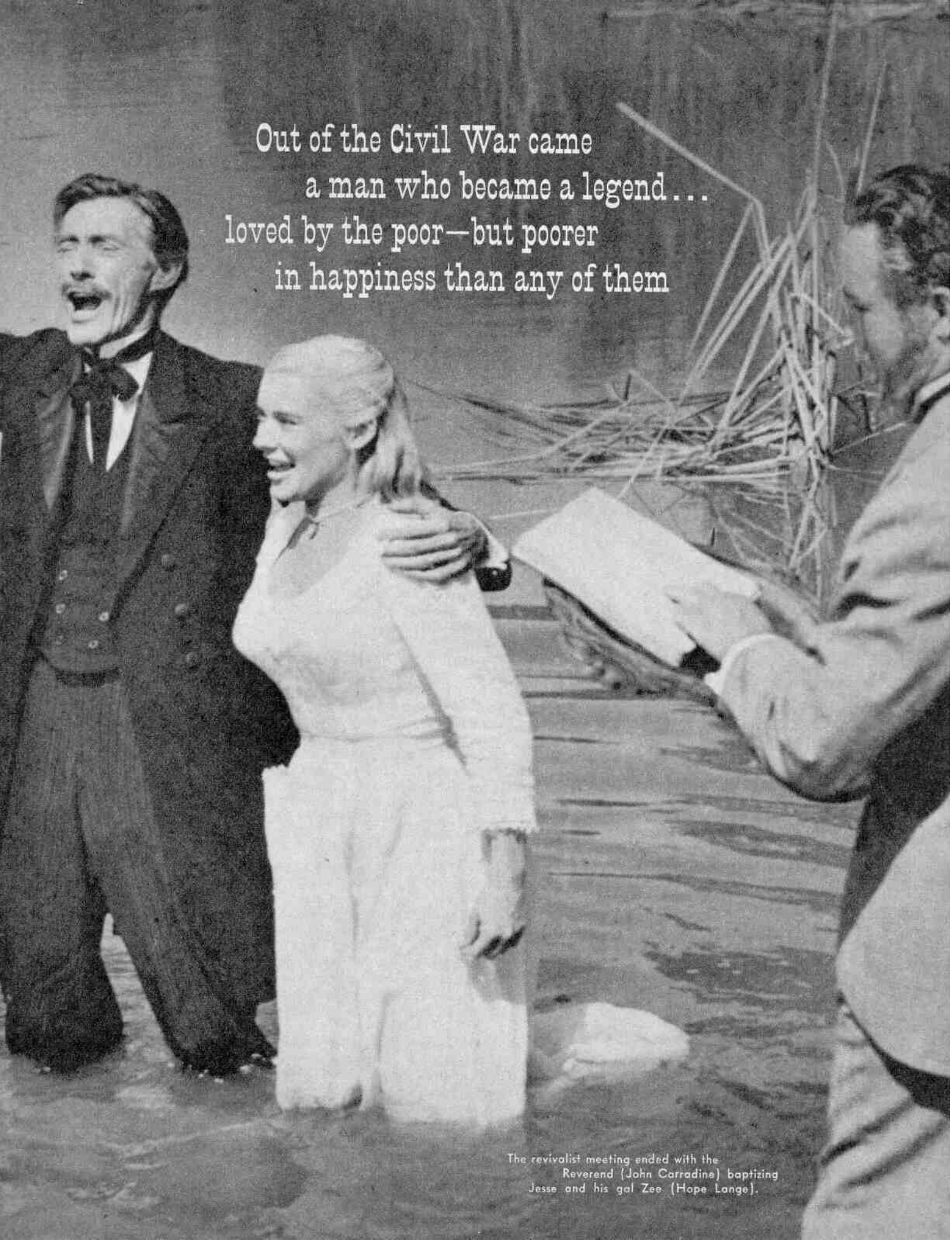


Robert Wagner in

the
TRUE
STORY
of
JESSE
JAMES

● When it all was over—when the blazing guns had cooled to the ice of legend and the James boys rode no more—people still wondered about him. They couldn't find the pattern. Where was the key that unlocked Jesse James? By the time of his (continued on page 24)





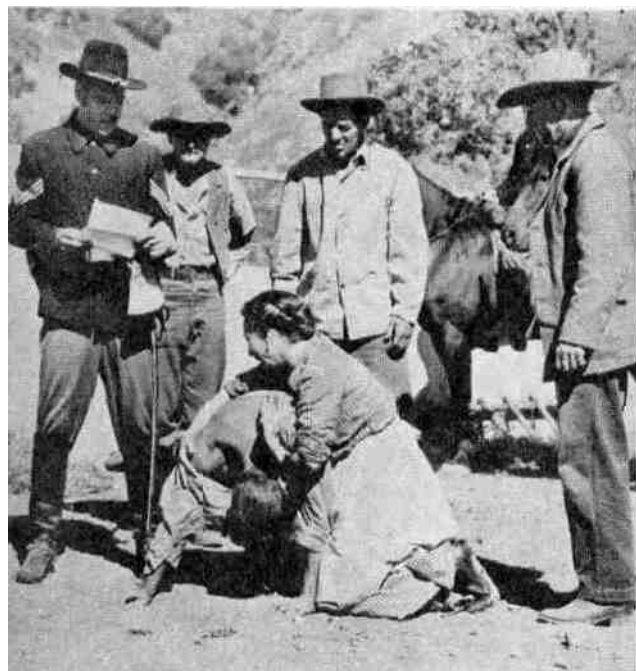
Out of the Civil War came
a man who became a legend...
loved by the poor—but poorer
in happiness than any of them

The revivalist meeting ended with the
Reverend (John Carradine) baptizing
Jesse and his gal Zee (Hope Lange).

THE TRUE STORY of JESSE JAMES

continued

• Robert Wagner (as Jesse James) • Jeffrey Hunter (as Frank James) • Hope Lange (as Zee) • Agnes Moorehead (as Mrs. Samuel)



Union Jaywalkers beat Jesse bloody and drove his folks from Missouri. That's when Jesse's war of revenge began.



Jesse and brother Frank led two lives. In St. Joe they were upstanding citizens; elsewhere they were hunted.

first mistake—the holdup of the bank in Northfield, Minnesota—many a puzzled man across the West would have paid close to the total of all Jesse's loot to know what had made him Jesse James.

For the answer to that, they'd have had to go a long way back.

His mother could remember when he'd brought home a bird fallen from its nest, and wouldn't be comforted until his preacher father, the Reverend James, had read a funeral service. But that was when Jesse was little. Afterwards, when he'd grown to sixteen and the Reverend was dead and his mother was remarried to kindly Dr. Reuben Samuel, the Civil War came.

Jayhawkers roamed Missouri, those dark years. Side with the South and you were fair game for them. There was that time they swept down on the Samuel farm—because Frank James, Jesse's older brother, was with the Confederate guerrilla Quantrill. They strung up Reuben Samuel to a tree and dragged his wife from her house and flogged the shirt off young Jesse's back, trying to make him tell where the raiders might be hiding out.

Their Union-sympathizing neighbors ordered the Samuels out of Missouri on pain of death. They took themselves over to Nebraska, where Reuben had kinfolk. Jesse left the farm, too—but he didn't head out with the rest of them. He showed up in Belltown, a village just laid waste by Quantrill's Confederate men, and greeted his brother Frank and his cousin Cole Younger—with the story of what had happened back at the farm still bitter on his boyish mouth.

"I'm here to join," he said, sliding off his mount. "Where's Quantrill?"

A stranger in fine clothes, with flowing black hair and a pale, hard face, strolled past just then. Cousin Cole yelled out to him, "Hey, Quantrill! Look who wants to join. Let's give him a rattle and sign him up."

"The South doesn't need children," the man said. "Go home."

But Jesse faced him. "Are you Quantrill? I can ride. And shoot."

"It takes more than that to fight under my flag."

Jesse's eyes blazed, "What does it take? What *does* it take, Quantrill?"

Challenged, the raider's gaze went hard. Slowly he unbuckled a gun belt. "Put it on," he said, and Jesse obeyed. Then he stood himself squarely in front of Jesse. "At the count of three, draw!"

Quantrill's hand hovered, hawk-lazy, over his own gun. Frank James made to thrust himself between them, but others dragged him back. "One!" Quantrill droned, and his voice was cold. "Two!" His eyes glazed over.

"No!" Frank pleaded. "Quantrill, he's only a kid. Jesse—"

"Three!" At the count, Jesse's gun cleared its holster. Faster yet, a Quantrill rider kicked it away. The leader had made no move to draw.

"He has possibilities," said Quantrill. The handsome face accommodated a cold smile. "Assign him to carry the standard. Horses, gentlemen!"

Cole Younger always claimed afterward that this first taste of prominence, with everyone talking about him, was the music that changed Jesse's life. And Cousin Cole did a lot of riding with him. Cole ought to know.

• Barney Remington, the man who was to pursue Jesse relentlessly through most of the rest of his life, first got to know him soon after Jesse'd joined Quantrill's band. Back then, with the war still on, Remington was a lieutenant in the Union paymaster's corps.

One winter night while his pay car stood on a snowbound rail siding, his captain called in a shawl-covered lass (*continued on page 57*)

(*cast on page 57; credits on page 61*)

The True Story of Jesse James

continued from page 24

THE CAST

Jesse James.....	Robert Wagner
Frank James.....	Jeffrey Hunter
Zee.....	Hope Lange
Mrs. Samuel.....	Agnes Moorehead
Rev. Jethro Bailey.....	John Carradine
Barney Remington.....	Alan Baxter
Cole Younger.....	Alan Hale
Mr. Samuel.....	Barry Phillips
Attorney Walker.....	Barry Atwater
Askew.....	Chubby Johnson
Charley.....	Frank Gorshin
Jim Younger.....	Biff Elliot

from the wagon of a camp-follower who had been peddling liquor among the men. Here was rum and here was a girl.

Grinning eagerly, the Captain himself helped her up into the car. Next he knew, a revolver was prodding his belly. The teenage boy who held it suddenly didn't look the least bit tempting, skirts notwithstanding. He and his helpers were out of the camp with the Union money before Remington could set the sentries on them.

Carreening into the night, the camp-follower's wagon passed an incoming produce wagon. Jesse emptied his gun and the wagon driver fell dead.

"I saw him kill that stranger for no reason at all," Barney Remington often said afterward—never knowing, of course, that the dead driver had been one of the Jayhawker crew who'd dragged Mrs. Samuel from her kitchen and lashed her younger boy unconscious. "A natural-born killer. He *likes* it," Remington often said.

- God's Grace—that's what the name Jesse signifies. And all down the years his mama kept praying for just that to descend on her son. God's Grace. She hated it, the way younger neighbors—like Cousin Mattie's pasty-faced boy, Robby Ford—seemed to look on Jesse as partly freak, partly hero. She recalled with an ache how they'd brought her son back to her:

The fighting was over, and the Samuels were on their way home to Missouri from exile. They were going to put up to rest at the house of her cousins Rowena and Rufus Cobb. Frank James and his patch-eyed friend Hughie caught up with them on the road.

With the two was Jesse—skinny, dirty, badly wounded. For the regular soldiers battles had finished a month since. But not for guerrillas. Federal troops refused to recognize them as soldiers. Jesse, carrying a white flag, hadn't even been armed when they'd opened up on him.

They arrived together at the Cobb farm, hungry, penniless, in their rickety wagon. Rufus Cobb—always a pinchpenny—was not of a mind to let the boy in. He couldn't work, and would have to be cared for. Frank had to promise to come back every second week from rebuilding the Samuels' own place, seventy miles along, and work out the wounded boy's keep. Rufus felt he had enough on his hands, with his wife's young sister Zee already foisted on him a full year to feed and bed.

So, until his own folks' home was in shape and he was strong enough to travel, young Jesse stayed with the Cobbs. He slept up in Zee's attic, and she moved down to the kitchen. She nursed him those first weeks, as tenderly as a mother bird. She was pretty, with a lonely sweetness about her.

When he was well enough, they sometimes walked into the village together. Zee worried about Jesse's blind young bitterness, and told him so.

"We'll soon be grownups," she said. She had a gentle, solemn voice. "*I'm* grown up already. Friends my age are married."

"You're younger than I am. Are you thinking of getting married?"

"Of course. Don't you ever think about the future?"

"Mostly about the past," Jesse answered. "I hope you get everything you want. Can't think of anyone I'd rather see happy." And somehow he was hugging her to him, kissing her on the lips, the eyes, the lips again.

Shaken, Zee drew away. "I—I wish you didn't have to go home—"

- But he did have to go, of course. As soon as he could ride a mule Frank came to fetch him. Rowena Cobb packed a lunch for them to eat on the way. Her husband reckoned his debt and claimed that Frank owed him a week more of his labor.

Up in the attic, Zee helped Jesse pack. "Can't you take me with you?" she begged. "Couldn't we be married?"

"Haven't I thought about it and thought about it?" Jesse moaned. "I couldn't provide for you. I don't even own these clothes."

But when they went down to say goodbyes, he couldn't help asking Rufus for her hand.

Frank slapped Jesse's back with delight. But Rufus squinted. "You've no money put by, and the farm's your mother's. I'd be pleased to see Zee married off. But she's been here over a year. There's something due me for that."

"It'll be paid," Jesse said; his young face was grim.

Rufus Cobb sneered. "There's a revival down your way, end of summer. Your crop'll be in. I'll bring the girl and we'll have the wedding."

So the brothers rode home and plowed and planted. But Missouri hadn't forgotten Quantrell's raids. In the night their neighbors came. The fields were set ablaze; bullets shattered the windows. One-eyed Hughie was lynched for helping them plant. End of summer, when the Cobbs arrived with Zee, they found only burned acreage and bitterness to greet them.

But the big three-county revival meeting was underway, and in its jammed tent there were moments of forgetting. Reverend Bailey was up on his platform, conducting the hymns and pleading for one bellwether to lead the lost sheep back to the fold. A Union soldier there tried to flirt with Zee. It got Jesse so riled that he was suddenly on his feet and crying out:

"Sisters and brothers in the Lord, I've been a sinner! These hands have been stained with blood. Federal soldiers are here tonight. In the war I killed them by the tens and by the scores. I repent!"

The audience was with him by now, rocking and shouting, "*Glory!*"

"At Centralia, Union prisoners groveled for mercy. We slaughtered them. I repent! Even now there are times I feel like killing a Bluecoat." He saw rage on the soldier's face, and grinned. "So pray for me!" he concluded, and sat down.

It was a real big night. Carried along on the stream of confession that he had begun just to bait his enemy, Jesse wound up in the river at Zee's side—both of them being baptized in Glory together. But up the bank, later, Rufus Cobb stood waiting, to say that Zee was leaving at daybreak with her kin.

"Zee's staying!" Jesse gasped. "We're getting married!"

"On what?" Cobb's cold eye measured him. "Smoke? Your farm's completely burned out. C'mon, Zee."

Jesse saw tears in her eyes as, she was led away. And desperation made him reckless. He went out looking for excitement that night, with Cousin Cole and some others

It was a warm night, with the moon full up. Roused by the revival, the boys' spirits were hunting an outlet. And in a town they hit toward daybreak, they found one.

Galloping up the main street, shooting and yelling to arouse the good citizens, they smashed store windows and scattered merchandise. When they came to the express company, Jesse rode in the doorway and roped the safe—which was on casters—and rolled it out into the street. Bouncing along, it hit the town pump and burst open. By now, townsmen with loaded shotguns were appearing at the windows. The boys fled, whooping and laughing.

When he got home, Jesse found Frank in the barn burning a colt—and Zee, not yet departed, was helping him. Frank looked grim as he listened to Jesse's tale.

"Have you lost your mind?" he demanded. "Jesse, we're under martial law. We were with Quantrill. We can't afford trouble."

But horses already were galloping up the road to the Samuel farm, and Cole and his boys, hugging their saddles, were yelling. When they'd reached their own homes, a squad of bluecoats had been waiting. The soldiers were after the boys now. In the melee an army man had been killed—so now they were outside the law for good.

And Zee went home meekly with Rufus.

• Three years, she waited there. Although there was no direct word from Jesse, at least they heard of him frequently—of him, and of his exploits that were making the name of James a byword. At the end of that time Zee was coming of age, and Rufus planned to turn her out, his responsibility for his wife's sister ended. An elderly neighbor had won his consent to come courting. He wanted an end to paying the girl's support.

And that was how matters stood the night Jesse reined his horse in by the dark back door of the Cobb house and then softly called Zee's name. She came running from the house and he swung down to face her—more mature than the boy she had known, richly but soberly clad, gold chain across his waistcoat and moustache across his lip. With one word—"Zee?"—he asked if he had come too late. And with one word—"Jesse!" she was in his arms.

Rufus appeared in the doorway then. But Jesse took a small sack of coins from a pocket and tossed it to the heartless man. "Zee and I—do we have your consent?"

"You do," Rufus said, after one heft of the sack.

But his wife cried out: "Wait! Jesse, the law's after you. You're hunted!"

"Let them hunt, Aunt Rowena. No one can find us. Don't worry about her." He was in his saddle again and on his way.

A couple of weeks after that, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Howard—a charming young couple, and so respectable—leased one of the finest houses in St. Joe from an agent named Grundy. Mr. Howard had mentioned being in railroads and banking, or some connected line. A genteel couple like the Howards kept property values high. Grundy was happy to furnish the house for his tenant; no expense was spared.

He might have been surprised, could he have noted the wistful satisfaction with which the Howards surveyed their new realm once he was gone.

"A home of our own," Jesse said, as if to make it real. "Our own!"

"Seven rooms and a garden!" Zee was seeing a miracle. She went to Jesse's arms. "And we'll have children, and Sundays we'll all walk to church together."

"Christmas Eve I'll play Santa Claus in a white beard. July Fourth we'll run up a flag and shoot firecrackers."

A clock somewhere began to chime the hour, and Jesse drew free of Zee's embrace. His wife had heard the chiming, too, and her smile faded. "Oh, Jesse!"

"I have to go. Now, Zee, remember your promise. No questions. *Never* any questions. Make believe I'm a businessman whose affairs require him to travel. While I'm gone you miss me, but you occupy yourself with our home and the neighbors. When I'm back life is good for us. Goodbye, Zee. . . ."

In St. Joe, as well as all over the West, dime novels with lurid covers appeared on the newsstands to inform avid readers of the exploits of the fearless Jesse James. His train holdups and bank raids read like the feats of a Robin Hood. One story told how he'd given a widow six hundred dollars to pay off the mortgage on her farm—and then had taken back the money at gun's point from the bloated Squire who'd aimed to cheat her. People loved Jesse.

Cole Younger regarded his cousin's fame with sour amusement. "Yessir, Jesse always liked to make folks sit up and take notice."

"If they catch him," grunted Cole's baby brother Bob, who by then was riding with the gang, "they'll hang him same as us."

"They might catch him and they might sentence him to hang. But I'll tell you one thing. Unless they build his gallows higher than anyone else's, Cousin Jesse won't come." Cole tossed back his head and howled at that.

• But such speculations had no place in the life of the respectable Mr. and Mrs. Howard of St. Joe. Nor of Mr. and Mrs. Woodson, their friends, who looked surprisingly like Frank James and his quiet wife Anne. With their children—Tim, aged two, and Mary, the baby—they attended the State Fair with the most respected folk in town.

Mr. Howard and Mr. Woodson had wandered away from their party for a bit—to look at the horses, somebody said—when the shooting started, down by the ticket booth. Three masked men dashed from the small building, and two made it afoot into the underbrush and got away. But the third was pulled off his horse as he tried to mount, and the mask ripped off him. Zee and Anne came rushing from the picnic grounds. But the captured man was a stranger.

While they still stood staring, Jesse touched his wife's arm. Frank stood unruffled at Anne's side as Jesse spoke mildly. "I believe some men robbed the box office."

"I hate it!" Zee breathed, and her agonized glance attracted Jesse's attention to a thick wad of bills half-protruding from his coat pocket. As he shoved them out of sight, the chattering crowd surged by to look at the prisoner. "The never knowing!" Zee whispered. "The always dreading! You've got to stop!"

Jesse patted her sleeve. "Tomorrow you'll wake up in our own bed in our own room and it will be the same as always."

Anne shook her head. "Zee's right. You know it, Frank. Speak up."

"What else can we do?" Jesse asked reasonably. "Even without a reward on our heads we have no trade, no profession. We're no longer young."

"Farming," Zee sobbed. "You could buy a farm."

Anne nodded. "That's what Frank would like. Tell him, Frank."

"Buy a farm with what?" demanded Jesse. "Want me to tell you about the James boys' financial affairs? What it costs to buy information about shipments and guards? The price of a night's safe lodging when a man is on the dodge? Five minutes ago I didn't have ten dollars to my name."

"Then why go on with it?" Zee begged. "What makes it worthwhile? It's misery every minute of the day and night. The fear of your being killed or—"

"It will never happen," Jesse said. Zee's lips quivered. "It just happened to Bill Ryan."

"Nothing has happened to him, and nothing will. No jury in this state will convict him. People are on my side, Zee. . . ."

There was plenty of excitement in St. Joe

when the jury brought in a verdict of guilty against William Ryan, for armed robbery at the State Fair—and when the judge imposed sentence of twenty-five years in prison. It was the first time ever that a member of the James gang had been convicted. Everyone knew that efforts had been made to bribe or intimidate the jury. His Honor thanked them in a ringing speech for doing their duty regardless.

Mr. Howard and Mr. Woodson had been in the front row of spectators throughout the trial, evidently moved by the keen interest of any good citizens in seeing law upheld. Several other observers remarked upon the extreme nervousness of the prisoner. But when the judge offered to reduce the sentence if Ryan would tell where the James boys could be found, he got no information.

"It's the beginning of the end for the Jameses," said Walker, the prosecuting attorney, when Howard and Woodson paused to congratulate him after the verdict. "I wonder if they'll recognize it? Well, if you found this trial interesting try to be there when I prosecute Frank and Jesse."

"That's something we couldn't possibly miss," said Mr. Woodson.

"I don't see how," said Mr. Howard. And they walked away together.

There was a rumor, not long after, that Mr. Walker had been held up from behind in a dark alley by two gunmen he could not see. They whispered, behind him, that the James brothers would surrender on condition of jail terms no longer than a year. Walker refused to bargain, and the men were gone before he could get a look at them. Interest in the story ran high, for many of the public had about gotten their fill of robberies and killings by the James gang. But of course all this had nothing to do with the respected Howards, who were off on the evening train to help celebrate Mr. Howard's mother's birthday in some distant place—the Woodsons going with them.

• At the train station they ran into Lawyer Walker, who was there to keep an appointment with one Barney Remington. Walker was showing the detective the warrants he had brought along for the arrests of Frank and Jesse James—warrants that had lain unserved in his desk drawer for many a year—when his four valued neighbors happened by. Remington had just been arguing against Walker's pessimism. He had straight information that the James boys would show up at the Samuel farm tonight to honor their mother's natal day. He meant to be there.

"Kinfolks, neighbors, former comrades-in-arms who shelter the Jameses and warn them of danger, sheriffs who turn pale when Jesse's name is mentioned—" Remington snapped his fingers in defiance of them all.

"Those are just small indications of something much stronger," Walker protested. "You're up against public opinion. Jesse James is the shooting spokesman for everyone whose life is harsh and drab and desperate. He's made out of their anger and secret wishes. They *want* him to go on."

And this was the moment when he caught sight of the Woodsons and the Howards, with their charming children. He introduced them to Remington carefully, not mentioning the detective's business in St. Joe. But Remington spoke right out.

"Barney Remington of the Remington Detective Agency," he introduced himself. He gripped the hand of Mr. Howard. "We've met before. On a train somewhere? Oh, well, it will come to me. I've just issued a statement to the press. I want everyone in Missouri to know I've opened a branch office here to deal especially with Frank and Jesse James and the Younger brothers and every other ruffian who's preyed upon my clients, the railroad and bank associations."

"You want folks to know?" questioned Mr. Woodson, in mild surprise.

"Especially those I hunt. I want them to know the price on their heads will be big enough to tempt even members of their own gang."

Mr. Howard also had a mild manner. "Some people don't consider the James boys to be so bad. Self-defense—" He shrugged. "Many of the crimes attributed to the Jameses were actually committed by others. It's well known here in Missouri." He tipped his hat politely before he strolled away.

"See now what you're up against?" Walker demanded triumphantly.

- The train the Howards and Woodsons had taken stopped, leagues out of St. Joe, in dark open fields. A posse of horsemen who had been carried in a baggage car were led down a ramp and filed off across the fields—with Barney Remington leading them. Jesse and Frank had been peering from the window, and Frank had just finished saying, "We're about a mile from Mama's. If it was daytime I bet we could see it"—so of course they noted the exodus. As the train began to roll again, Zee saw Jesse's face.

"What is it?" she demanded, suddenly alarmed. "What's wrong?"

"They're not hunting possum," he observed of the horsemen. "There's a train leaving Kearney back to St. Joe in half an hour. I think you girls better take it."

He and Frank were alone when they cut across fields in the dark, soon after. They were just breasting a rise when, half a mile ahead, a sudden jarring flash and explosion tore open the night. Dogs began to howl, and then they heard the horsemen coming. They ducked into the undergrowth. It was Remington's posse, all right, but at a farm gate directly opposite one rider peeled off. Jesse recognized him as Askew, one of the late Jayhawkers who had flogged him and burned his home long ago.

Neighbors summoned by the explosion were running for the Samuel place as Jesse and his brother reached it. The house still stood, but every window had shattered and the door hung crazily. As they rushed into the wrecked parlor, Dr. Samuel was kneeling beside his unconscious wife and binding what remained of her right arm. He lifted dazed eyes to his stepsons.

"We were sitting up waiting for you. The men came and yelled for you to surrender. We told them you weren't here but they wouldn't believe us. We put out the lights. Then—see what they did to Archie?" In one corner of the room, their twelve-year-old half-brother lay dead.

Robby Ford, who had panted in with other neighbors, had a revolver in his hand. As he held it out, they saw the RDA marked on its butt. Remington Detective Agency.

One of the shocked neighbors edged up to Frank. "I've never been one of your supporters, or Jesse's," he said angrily. "But this is a shame and an outrage. I want you to know we're going to do something about this. Some of us are going up to the State Capitol tomorrow. We're going to tell our congressmen just what we think. ..."

Things moved fast at the Capitol. Speeches were made. Editorials were printed. Shocked by the tragedy at the Samuel farm, the legislators were in a mood to make up as best they might for the law's horrible error. It wasn't many days before Dr. Samuel was whipping his buggy along a country road to keep a rendezvous with his stepsons at a wooded hill. He was waving a telegram just received at Kearney, and he thrust it excitedly into Frank's hand.

"Amnesty! The governor is being asked to grant amnesty to you both!"

Eager to show it to his wife, the doctor caught back the message and flicked his reins. He was moving rapidly up the road, the two riders beside him, when they passed the field where Farmer Askew was plowing.

and began to race for his house.

"Put it out of your minds, boys," Samuel said quickly, knowing his stepsons' thoughts. "Everyone knows he spied for the Remingtons. He won't find the living easy around here from now on. You'll have to be satisfied with that. You've got too much at stake."

"We're not going to do anything—" Frank was beginning, when Jesse spun his horse and took off across the field after the terrified farmer. As he rode Askew down, his gun was blazing. The fugitive plunged, dead.

And that was the end of the chance of forgiveness. AMNESTY BILL DEFEATED . . . REVENGE MURDER OF FARMER INFLUENCES VOTE . . . the headlines trumpeted. In one blind moment, Jesse had made certain that he and Frank could never turn back. He had made the choice. The decision had been his, and no one else's.

- So the trail led on. Sixteen years of it. Until Northfield.

The gang, when it gathered on summons at Frank's respectable house, had aged considerably since its first wild days. Cole and Jim Younger were about forty, and so were Clell Miller and Bill Stiles and Sam Wells and Frank. The youngsters were a new generation—Robby Ford and Charley, his broth-

er. And Jesse was counting on them only to get Zee and Anne back from the farm to St. Joe and not to ride north, although they begged him to go along. Except for the baby of the Younger family, Bob, there wasn't a man making the ride who would see thirty again. While they waited to hear Jesse's plan, they kidded about extra pounds and thinning hair.

Then silence fell all around the room. "A bank," Frank told them. "In Northfield, Minnesota. Bill Stiles just got back from scouting it."

"Minnesota?" There was a stir. "That's four hundred miles from here!"

"Four hundred and twenty," Jesse said. "Tell them, Bill."

Stiles took over. "There's a bank up there that's never been hit. Jesse sent me to look it over last month. It has seventy-five to a hundred thousand cash on hand."

But, obviously, the boys were troubled. They'd never gone so far afield before. If something went wrong, they were in territory only Bill knew—although Bill had scouted every back road of the distance.

Sensing rebellion, Jesse spoke up, firmly. "I've led you and led you well for sixteen years. I'm giving you a chance to make enough to retire on. We start right now." He saw them out, silent but obedient, before hunting Zee.

At thirty, she was beautiful in a way that had been mere prettiness earlier. But right now she looked worried.

"Jesse, will this really be the last one? Really, Jesse?"

"The very last." And he meant it. "When I come home I'll have enough money to invest in some small business. I'll never have to leave you and the children again. Don't

worry, Zee. Come wave goodbye."

But when he went out to his horse, she lingered in the hall a moment for a worried word with Frank. "Will it be all right?" she asked, wide-eyed. "Now he's excited. He's on his way to something. But to what? He doesn't know that afterward, when he's home, he cries in his sleep—that I have to hold him and rock him like a baby. And have you noticed his hands?" She held up clenched fists. "They're like this! All the time. What is it that will bring him peace, Frank? What is he searching for?"

"I don't suppose we'll know until he finds it. I'll watch over him, Zee."

- They followed country roads to Minnesota—a party of prosperous farmers, by the looks of them. But under his duster each man wore two revolvers, and a carbine was strapped to each saddle. Jesse radiated a curious eagerness as they rode, but the rest were tense.

"Jesse," Frank said, "it's not too late to call it off."

"Call it off? This is one raid that can't fail. We have the best horses you or anyone else has ever seen. Bill Stiles knows the country like the back of his hand. I've never planned anything more carefully."

With Northfield half a mile ahead, Jesse put the plan into action. Clell and Sam and Dick rode on ahead, to see that the street was clear. Dim-witted Tucker Basham was left by the roadside, to cut the phone wires out of town at two-thirty exactly, so no alarm could get ahead of them. When Jesse and Frank rode into the town square, they could spot Clell and Bill lounging near the getaway street and Dick drinking at the public pump. With no sign of recognition, the James boys rode past them and on to the bank. A few citizens went by, but not many. Seemingly a stranger to them, Bob Younger sauntered into the bank a few paces ahead. Jesse and Bill followed him, inconspicuously.

But outside, where Frank and Cole and Jim were tending the magnificent getaway horses, it already had started happening—the one little hitch that no plan, however perfect, could have anticipated or provided for.

A friendly local farmer who bred horses was attracted by the very quality of the mounts Jesse had insisted on. He paused to ask innocently where they'd come from, and to try to promote a trade. While the boys were still trying to get rid of the unwanted company, a scream came from the bank.

Instantly, the square was pandemonium. Cole shot the stunned farmer dead before he could sound an alarm. But other voices lifted. "*It's a holdup! They're holding up the bank!*" Sheriff Hillstrom bolted from his office. A half-shaved patron of the barber shop darted across the street, still lathered.

The members of the gang outside the bank hit leather and began to yell and mill and shoot out store windows, to create confusion and keep the town under cover. Those inside dashed out, empty-handed, and made for their mounts in a return hail of bullets. A moment later the men still alive were streaking out of town across the river bridge. But Bill Stiles, the only one who knew the local roads, lay dead in a gutter.

- It seemed, those next days, as if the whole population of four hundred miles of country was in the fugitive-hunting posse. Sheriff Hillstrom got word out to every lawman in the area—for Tucker Basham, fascinated by a ripe farm girl picking berries, hadn't cut the wires till late. Barney Remington joined up with the searchers. Bloodhounds were imported to Minnesota.

At her farm, Mrs. Samuel called in the Reverend Bailey to pray with her for her hunted boys. Zee tried her best to comfort the distracted woman before returning to St. Joe, where Jesse always wanted her to wait for him.

The lawmen dynamited a cave where, ac-

cording to the hounds, the gang had holed up. But only one outlaw came reeling from it, blanched with shock—and he was neither James boy, but only one of the lesser fry. A couple of counties further on, with reinforcements added to the search, they chased the remaining fugitives into swampy bottomland. The dogs went half crazy there.

In the reeds, deep into shallow ooze, they found lathered horses abandoned by the desperate men ahead. With insects humming a death chant and nothing but brush and muddy water in view, some of the weary hunters turned back. But not Remington; not Hillstrom. Fever-eyed, they clung to the trail. Remington raised his clients' rewards by five thousand dollars to keep spirits up.

On a small, brushy island deep in the desolation, the advancing line flushed out the Youngers—Cole, Jim and young Bob—after a gun battle that was like a pocket-sized war. But Jim was dead and Bob was dying and Cole made out that he'd never heard of Jesse James, that sardonic grin still on his lips.

With the Youngers accounted for, only Frank and Jesse and simple Tucker Basham remained to be tracked down. The posse pressed on. But the trio they hunted were still well ahead of them, sleeping the night out in a swamp cave, catching fresh wind. Jesse was just as self-assured as ever, despite the fiasco they had made of the hold-up. But Frank had a look of troubled thought.

"How did it happen?" he muttered, over their feeble fire. "I don't mean just at Northfield, Jesse. What's happened to our whole lives? Why have we ended up here, hunted and doomed?"

Jesse looked at him sharply. "They forced us into this life. We never had any choice."

"Didn't we? The State Fair and what happened after—we had a chance then, didn't we? We had the choice lots of times. But you always slammed the door on it. Why, Jess?" Frank's gaze locked his brother's. "Why?"

"Did you expect me to let someone kill Archie and tear off Mama's arm and not do something? You think we'd have stayed alive if we'd given ourselves up?"

"Staying alive, that never seemed of much concern to you. If it was, why did the raids you planned get more and more reckless? Oh, your reasons were good. But for the first time in my life I'm looking at what you've done."

"Maybe you're wise enough, after all these years, to tell the answer?"

Frank ignored the bitter jibe. "Look at all the pieces, Jesse—everything you've done since the beginning could just as well have been done by a man looking to get killed!"

"No!" Jesse glared at him. "No!"

"It *must* be. I've stood by your side all these years and watched you swallow up family and friends—Mama, Archie, Cole, Bob, Jim, Bill, Clell—"

"Shut up!" Jesse yelled at him. "Shut up!" For a minute longer, Frank stood staring back. Then he wheeled and quit the cave, and the bleak swamp swallowed him.

The way home was a long, lonely way for one man alone.

• The headlines went crazy: JESSE JAMES KILLED IN SWAMP! OUTLAW IDENTIFIED BY WATCH! OUTLAW'S MOTHER SENDS FOR BODY! FRANK JAMES RUMORED TO HAVE LEFT THE COUNTRY! In the Howard home, Zee fought down her grief and told the children she was going for a brief visit to Grandma's. They could not even be allowed to know their father was dead.

The Ford boys, Charley and weasel-faced Robby, had come from Kearney to escort their kinswoman to the funeral. Anne was staying with the children. Zee was ready right on time to go to the depot. Straight, slim, deathly white, she opened the front door to leave. The filthy, tattered, unshaven man leaning against it half fell into her arms.

It was night before they had him washed and combed and feeling better. He lay on the parlor sofa with the others gathered around.

"I knew it wasn't you they found up north," Robby Ford stuttered. "It sounded more like Tucker. Put your watch in his pocket to throw 'em off?"

Frank spoke somberly. "I'm sorry I left you, Jess. I just had to."

"I know." The tattered man was deep in thought. "Northfield was the end. I'm frightened. What am I going to do? Right now I just want to live in peace somewhere, with Zee and the children. I know a farm up in Nebraska. Prettiest you ever saw. What a long, roundabout way to become a farmer! But—no money."

"You're not just talking, Jess?" Frank asked it eagerly. "Anne and I have a little. Mama has some. How long will it take you to pack? I can catch the late train to Mama's and be back with her and Doc and the money in the morning. Jesse, you're going to have that farm!"

By noon next day they were ready to go. In his shirtsleeves, Jesse finished tying up the last valise, feeling as if he'd just been born again. When Zee came in, singing, he swung her high and kissed her and laughed from deep inside.

Robby Ford was the only one who seemed deflated by the turn that affairs had taken. He had figured so long on some day being allowed to ride with the famous James gang. And now the gang was no more. Now the wild glory was over. All he had left was the gun Jesse had given him as a souvenir, because in Nebraska Farmer Howard would have no use for guns.

There in the stripped bedroom Robby said sadly, "We're going to miss you, Jess. Never get a chance to ride with you, now."

Jesse grinned. "It's just as well. The life I led isn't to be envied. Excitement, yes. But you always have to be on guard, eyes in the back of your head. As rewards go higher, your friends grow fewer. You worry: old ones might be tempted, or new ones hope to get a reputation by putting a bullet in you. Dick Lidell ran out on us in Northfield. If you don't think I expect him to try to put a bullet in me—" But Jesse could still laugh as he bent for the valise.

Behind him, Robby said in a choked voice, "He'll never get a chance."

"What makes you so sure?" Jesse asked. And the gun went off. He turned, eyes wide with disbelief, to see it smoking there in Robby's white hand. He jerked up fingers to the back of his head, and they came away bloody. He made a shocked, choking sound and pitched forward.

The shot had been heard. On the street, people were running—past the carriage fetching Frank and the Samuels from the depot, past the neat white fence, up to the Howards' front door. Robby, bursting from the house, was screaming hysterically: "I just killed Jesse James! Me! Robby Ford! I just killed him!" But nobody seemed to want to listen. They were too busy stampeding into the Howard parlor, clawing for souvenirs, yelling themselves. They wouldn't listen. They wouldn't stop to tell him how brave he was, killing the great outlaw single-handed.

And on the floor of the bedroom upstairs, where Zee knelt with the bloody head in her lap, Jesse sighed a vast, weary sigh. His clenched fist relaxed. Hugging him to her, Zee stared at the limp hand and then—slowly—up at Frank. His nod said what they both were thinking. Whatever it was, whatever he'd hunted down through the years, at last Jesse James had found it.

THE END

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