

JESSE JAMES AND PALS.

A BOY'S REMINISCENCES OF THE TRAIN ROBBERS.

Casual Visits of the Gang to Leavenworth—Jesse James' Presentiment—Cruelty of Wood Hite—Politeness of Clell Miller—Charlie Fitt's Malice.

Every time I read of one of these big train robberies, said a man who lives in New York, I get to thinking of the many occasions on which my boyish trail was cut by various members of the James gang, the original kingbees in the business of sticking up trains. I lived in Leavenworth, Kan., during the last seven years of the seventies. While Leavenworth was already, with a population of about 15,000, the metropolis of Kansas, it was nevertheless a pretty bad town at that time. It preserved its frontier character for a good many years after other towns farther west took on the manners and methods of civilization. It was a wide-open town, not far removed to the east and north of what used to be the great cattle trail, and the place was always filled with hard characters, genuine bad men of the type that has practically passed; packers, freighters, mule-whiskers, refugees from the rough law of the Far West, who considered, not unjustifiably, that when they got as far east as the Missouri River they had a pretty fair cinch that the law would not overtake them. The town was frequently visited by members of the James gang, which was just about in the flower of its day at the beginning of the period I speak of. The gang never operated in Leavenworth, and for that reason its members were enabled to feel themselves pretty safe there.

As a matter of fact, queer as it may seem, the sentiment of the town up to and after the death of Jesse James at the hand of Bob Ford was always more or less on the side of the band of robbers. Deperado as he was, the people of Leavenworth surely regarded Jesse James as the real thing, not particularly because of the immunity the town enjoyed at his hands, but because the populace of the place was of a sort to be impressed by the dare devil recklessness of many of the exploits of James, and his fiery, untamed bunch. The people of the place were rather inclined to dwell upon the negative virtues of the James boys than to dilate upon their many manifestations of fiendishness. Many a story was told around Leavenworth in these days of the generous aid Jesse James had extended to this or that old woman, the distress among poor families in Missouri and Kansas which he had relieved during cold winters, the would-be emulative lads that he had advised to cling to the right, and so on, until, in the eyes of the rising generation out there, the star robber of this age possessed all the gallantry and generosity of Dick Turpin or Robin Hood.

The James gang never, to my knowledge, visited Leavenworth in a body. They came in separately, or in pairs, or when the gang, as a concrete body, was lying low, and they hung around the town, not, of course, putting themselves particularly in evidence, until called away by their chiefs, the James boys, to rehearse for some big job of plundering. In much the same way members of the gang used, at that time, to hang around Wichita, Lawrence, Atcaison, Grasshopper Falls, and other places in Eastern Kansas, and in various Missouri towns, Sedalia, Independence, Jefferson City, Eston, and St. Joe, where Jesse James got his finishing capsuls in the back from Bob Ford's treacherous gun. Perhaps Leavenworth was safer for them than any of those places. At any rate, none of them was ever molested on these occasions, even when it was known by all hands, including the authorities, that such-and-such a member or members of the James gang temporarily sojourned in the town, and in spite of the fact that the rewards placed upon the heads of the robbers aggregated tens of thousands of dollars.

Now, as to the various occasions on which I, a barefooted urchin, got into the James gang picture, simply by reason of my being a snub-nosed, freckle-faced young inhabitant of one of the towns that was occasionally made a headquarters by members of that bad gang of men.

Jesse James I only saw once, and I didn't know it when I was sizing the robber chief up, or I would probably have been scared almost to death and chased home plubbering. Oddly enough, Jesse James, the chief, was the last man of the gang I ever saw. A block from where my folks lived, on Pawnee street there was a corner grocery kept by a man named Jeff Brunstetter, a man who had a record with a gun in Missouri, a long while before he settled down in Leavenworth, and a member of Quantrell's gang of guerrillas. He had been a playmate of Frank James when the two were very young, and he had spanked Jesse when the latter was a small boy in Missouri. One drowsy afternoon in the month of August, 1879, I was lying

on a couple of sacks of bran in the back part of Brunstetter's grocery, picking slivers out of my bare feet, when a rather tall thick set, well built man, with very broad shoulders, a full beard, raven black in color, a bronzed ruddy complexion where his beard did not grow, and wearing a linen duster that reached almost to his heels, and a wide sombrero, walked into the store. Brunstetter was back of the counter, cutting some salt meat, when the man came in. He looked up and I saw the two men exchange quick glances of recognition.

"Hello, Jeff," said the man in the long duster, in a deep, rather musical bass. "How're you cutting it? Haven't seen you for five years now, have I?"

"Howdy, pal," replied Brunstetter. "Yes, I guess it's about five years, winter of '74, I believe, since I saw you. I've been following your route though, podner. Bad route, bad game. Almost time you knocked off. How's your brother?"

The two men walked on the extreme rear of the store, and when the man in the duster passed by where I was spread out on the bran sacks he gave me a keen look which I returned, with kid-like impudence, and I had a good, square gaze into his cold, bright, steely blue eyes, the eyes of the bad man out and out. The two men talked together in a low tone in the after part of the store for ten or fifteen minutes. I watched them idly. Finally the stranger stretched his arms, yawned, and said he'd

be moving on. Brunstetter said something to him, and then I saw the stranger unbutton one of the buttons of his duster near the waist-line, reach in and pull from his belt a big ball cartridge. He handed it to Brunstetter, who put it in his pocket. Then the stranger shook hands with Jeff and walked out.

Three days later I happened to be in the store again when a friend of Brunstetter's from another part of town came in.

"Jesse was in to see me a few days ago, said Brunstetter to his friend. He's turned superstitious and thinks his finish is nigh. Got it into his head that some member of his own outfit'll put it onto him. Handed me a cartridge out of his belt as a kind o' keepsake, and he was in a sotter frame of mind than ever I saw him," and Brunstetter pulled out of his pocket the ball cartridge that I had seen Jesse James hand to him three days before.

A number of years before this my younger brother and I both of us small lads, were taking off our scanty summer clothing on the Kansas bank of the Missouri, up near Fort Leavenworth, for a swim, when a couple of rough-looking men came along. The men stopped and watched our preparations for the swim. Small as we were, both my brother and I were good swimmers, and we struck out into the swift-flowing current of the Big Muddy to show off before the two hard-looking strangers. When we swam in again to the shore the two men were un-

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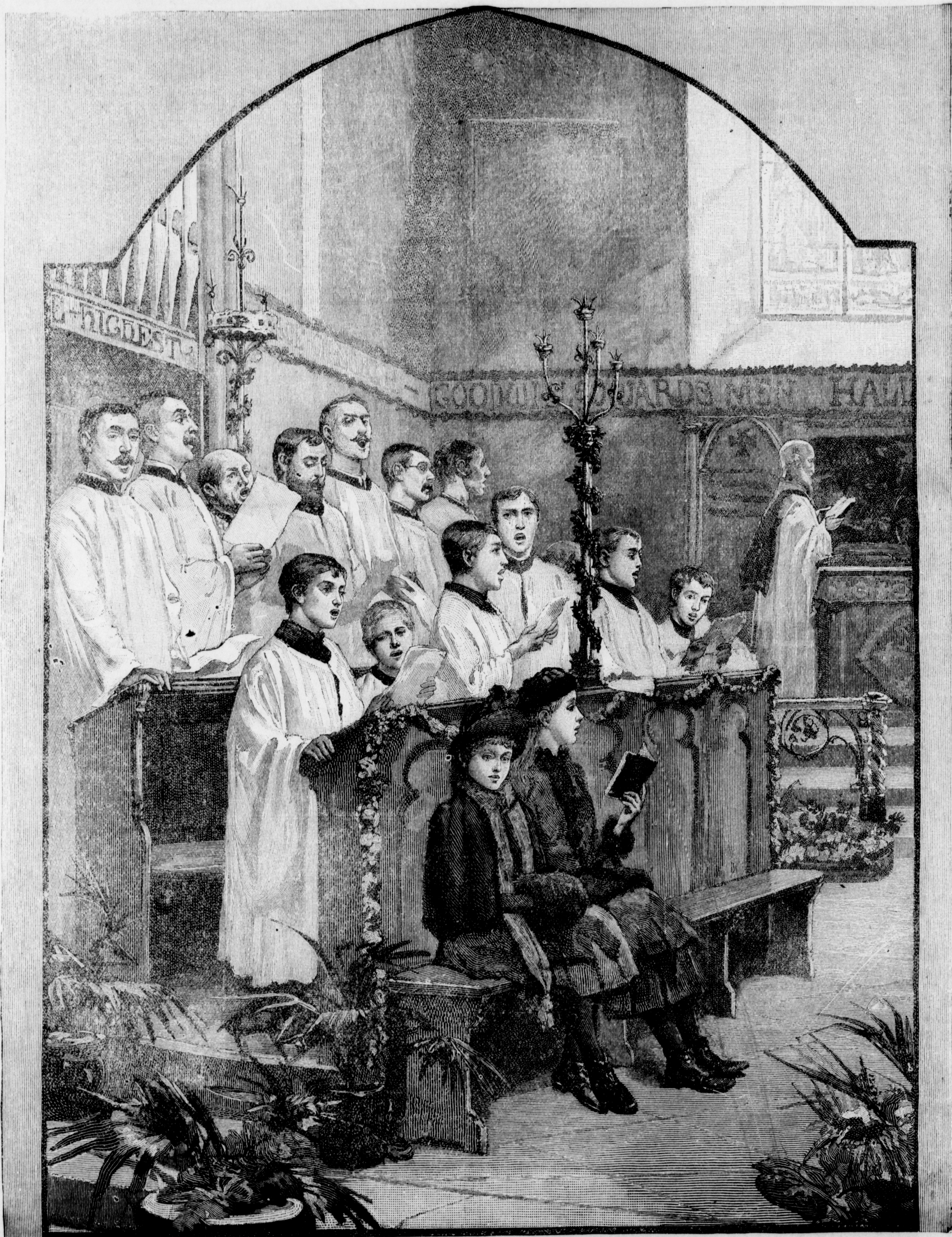
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fastening from its moorings an old skiff that had been tied up for a long time. They ripped off an old tumbledown shed on the shore a couple of bosads, which they split and roughly whittled into oars, and then they pushed the skiff off.

"Want a ride in the skiff, sons?" one of the men, who had an evil face, and a very fiery red beard, asked us, and, grabbing our clothes, my brother and I hopped into the skiff with the two men. They pulled and sculled the boat into the middle of the Big Muddy, which is over a mile wide at Fort Leavenworth, and then the man with the red beard deliberately picked us two kids up, one under each arm, and threw us overboard into the dangerous swirling eddies of the Missouri. He roared with delight when our two heads bobbed to the surface, and he seemed to be im-

mensely tickled to note our ineffectual efforts to reach the skiff again, ineffectual on account of the tremendous swiftness of the current. The other man was apparently more humane, for he said to our tormentor, the fellow with the red beard: "Better let 'em in again, Hite, Hite. They're gettin' weak."

The red bearded man sculled downstream a bit after us and permitted us to climb into the stern sheets of the skiff, weak and pretty nearly played out. Then he rowed us back to the shore. He had taken off his coat and rolled up the sleeves of his hickory shirt. A big blue and red snake was tattooed in coils around his brawny right fore-arm, and beneath the snake, in big letters of red, was tattooed the name, "Wood Hite." We lost no time in dressing and getting away from the two men, once we got ashore. The red-bearded man was Wood Hite, one of the most desperate and cruel members of the James gang.



THE CHOIROISTERS.

Handwritten signatures and scribbles at the bottom of the page, including a large signature that appears to be 'J. M. W.' and other illegible marks.