

Christmas Tree Detail

by JOHNSTON McCULLEY



When Sergeant Willard lets Johnny Bight show his holiday spirit, hostile Cheyennes are put to rout!

JUST before noon, Sergeant Gus Willard found the arrow. He found it off the trail when he was riding back down a hill to rejoin the detachment. It was a Cheyenne war arrow and seemed to have been dropped accidentally by some careless tribesman.

When he had left Fort Wallace three days before on a special detail ordered by

Captain Marwick, post commander, there had been no rumors of roving small bands of Indians, hostile or otherwise. And no Cheyennes were thought to be in this vicinity. Those things made Sergeant Gus Willard thoughtful as he rode back down the hill toward the ravine from which came sounds of ringing axes as two men worked to fell a tree.

He had gone through the War Between the States, and had remained in the cavalry when his regiment had been transferred to this wild Kansas territory. He knew Indians. He had not won his chevrons through favoritism. Now he was gray-haired and ruddy-faced and wise in many ways. He could smell trouble, though he saw nothing now to indicate that it was near.

A few days before, at Fort Wallace, Captain Marwick had sent for him.

"Willard, you're entitled to a little holiday," the captain had said. "Take a heavy four-mule wagon, a teamster and two troopers. We want a Christmas tree, a Yule log and some miscellaneous green stuff. You know that big ravine about halfway to Sheridan City, off to the left?"

"Yes, sir," Willard had replied. "Some fine trees there, Willard. I want a real Christmas at the post this year. This detail is double-headed. One part is to get the Yule log, tree and green stuff and lug it back to the post."

"I understand, sir."

"The other part—leave the two troopers you take with you to cut the tree and log. You go on with the wagon to Sheridan City and get Private Johnny Bight. He can ride in the wagon—can't manage a horse yet. At Sheridan City get the Christmas stuff on this list I've made—tree decorations, colored candles and all that. On the way back, stop and pick up your two men and the tree and stuff and come on in. Repeat."

"I am to take a wagon, four-mule team, teamster and two troopers. Drop the troopers at the ravine to cut tree, log and green branches. Proceed to Sheridan City and get the goods you have listed, and pick up Private Bight. On the way back, pick up the troopers and the stuff they have cut, and come to post."

"Correct. Nice little outing for you, Sergeant. Cold, but clear. Don't imagine we'll have more snow for a few days. That's all. Dismissed."

IT had been something of an outing for the hard-working sergeant so far, he admitted. He had been glad to be sent on the detail. He had been working hard around the post, overseeing the construction of a couple of new buildings and seeing to the instruction of a new batch of recruits.

Crusted snow covered the rolling Kansas country. The wind was biting cold at times. But good weather had favored them on the trip.

Willard had dropped the two troopers with food and a small tent and tools and gone on to Sheridan City, riding beside the heavy wagon and talking to the mule driver. At Sheridan City, the bustling boom town built on the new Kansas Pacific Railway, he had got the stuff Captain Willard had ordered, and had picked up Private Johnny Bight.

Johnny Bight had been a strong young trooper up to a couple of months before. He had been badly injured in Sheridan City when, with a detail of troopers, he had worked at unloading railroad freight cars of army supplies. His body had mended quickly enough, but not his mind.

A blow on the head at the time of his accident had done something dreadful to Johnny Bight's mind. In body, he was a strong man of twenty-three again; in mind, he was an infant.

Johnny Bight had been discharged from the temporary railroad hospital at Sheridan City, and there was nothing to do but return him to Fort Wallace for medical examination and ultimate discharge. He was easy to handle. He obeyed every order or request Sergeant Gus Willard gave him,

followed the grizzled sergeant around like a tot following his father.

The return trip between Sheridan City and the ravine had been uneventful. But Willard had “felt” Indians. He knew they were somewhere in the vicinity, though he had not seen them except for one he spotted for an instant atop a hill in silhouette against the bright sky.

And now—the arrow. A Cheyenne arrow, and a war arrow. If a roving band of restless young Cheyennes had put on paint and gone forth to kill and rob, there might be trouble.

The work in the ravine was about done. Sergeant Willard had decided to get the heavy wagon loaded before nightfall, spend the night in the ravine, and start on at dawn. They would be back at the post by the end of tomorrow. And in plenty of time. It was three days until Christmas.

Now, as he approached the men in the ravine, with his horse at a walk, Willard appraised the situation swiftly with practised eye. The Yule log had been cut and was loaded on the wagon. The troopers and teamster were lashing the tree in the wagon, and the green boughs that had been cut were in a neat pile ready to be loaded.

Near where the two troopers had camped was a good spring. The sides of the wide ravine were heavily wooded, which wasn't so good. In case of a sneak attack the enemy would have an abundance of cover.

Sergeant Gus Willard rode into camp and stopped near the wagon, bending forward in his saddle with his forearms crossed on the pommel. Ed Cooper, the Army teamster, strolled over to him. Jim Ellison and Lew Jones, both experienced cavalymen, were lashing the tree in place.

Johnny Bight, the mentally deficient one, was fussing around with something over beside a big rock.

“Everything about ready, Sarg,” Ed Cooper reported. “We can start early in the mornin’.”

“Good,” Willard muttered, glancing around at the brush. “Get along all right with Johnny Bight?”

“He got a mite restless after you rode away. Heard the men talkin’ about Christmas, and began mouthin’ about it himself. You know what he did? Cut himself a little tree and planted it by that big rock. Then he begged and whined until I opened one of them packin’ cases and got him out a little stuff. He wanted to fix the tree, he said. Just some tinsel and a few colored glass balls and half a dozen candles. Thought it’d keep him quiet and out of our way while we were rushin’ things here. Didn’t think you’d object.

“That was all right,” Sergeant Willard replied, as he straightened in his saddle. “Poor devil! A husky lad like him—and his wits gone.”

“No future for him,” Cooper admitted.

“Ed,” Willard told the teamster, speaking in a low voice, “get Ellison and Jones over here without Johnny noticin’ anything’s going on.”

WITHIN two minutes, the troopers were standing with the teamster beside the sergeant’s mount. Willard handed the arrow down to one of them.

“Found it up there on the hillside,” the sergeant said. “Far from the trail. A Cheyenne war arrow. May mean nothin’ and may mean a lot. I’ve been smellin’ Injuns all day.”

“Me, too,” Trooper Lew Jones confessed.

“They’ve been trailin’ us and keepin’ out of sight,” Willard went on to say. “No way of tellin’, now, how many are in the bunch. Four of us—we can’t count on Johnny in a scrap.”

“If they jump us, it’ll be late tonight or

just afore dawn,” Jim Ellison guessed.

“Stoke up the fire and cook supper,” Willard ordered. “Fix it so we can bed down near the spring. Those bunches of rocks will furnish cover if there’s trouble. Get the horses in close and picket ‘em behind that fringe of brush. Mules, too. We’ll swing the wagon around and across the floor of the ravine—make a good barricade. Don’t let on to Johnny. Let him play around with his little tree.”

They ate an early supper and packed away everything except the coffeepot for morning use. Horses and mules were brought close to the camp and picketed behind the brush. The wagon was slued around for a barricade.

Through all this, Johnny Bight wandered around like a man who did not understand. He muttered to himself continually, but the others could not catch his words.

“If trouble comes, we’d better get him in the wagon and see he stays there,” Willard suggested.

The wind died down and it turned considerably colder at sunset. But moon and stars burned in a cloudless sky. They would get back to Fort Wallace without encountering a snowfall or a blizzard—if they got back at all.

The country had been pestered since early spring with bands of roving young hostiles who refused to go to the reservations, despite the orders of their chiefs. There had been a few brief clashes, nothing serious—but always there was the fear that there might be a sanguinary conflict which would be the prelude to a small-sized Indian war. Commanders of detachments of cavalry away from fixed posts were always cautioned never to start trouble.

Sergeant Gus Willard knew all this. He also knew that the way to avoid a conflict with Indians was to keep from revealing

that one was expected. To be on guard and fully prepared for a clash without seeming to be so—that was always best.

Dusk came swiftly. The little campfire was allowed to burn beyond the wagon. Blankets were spread on the ground in dark spots, but the men did not expect to sleep. Ammunition was broken out and distributed.

“Ellison,” Sergeant Willard ordered one of his troopers, “go afoot up to the lip of the ravine and watch toward the north. Jones, you watch toward the South. Cooper, stay with me.”

Ellison and Jones adjusted their ammunition belts, inspected sidearms and picked up their carbines.

“If you see anything that looks like trouble, get back here quietly, if possible, and report. Don’t shoot unless you have to—and don’t shoot first.”

The two troopers went away through the shadows to take up their observation posts. Willard went to the fire and filled two tin cups with scalding coffee and handed one to Cooper. As they sipped, Johnny Bight wandered up to them.

“Want—want—” he muttered, pointing to the coffeepot.

Willard poured a mug of coffee for him, and Johnny sat down on a rock and began sipping, muttering to himself between sips.

“If anything breaks,” Willard whispered to Cooper, “you jump in and help me grab Johnny, and we’ll lash him in the wagon under the green boughs.”

Johnny finished drinking his coffee, put down the tin mug and began wandering around the camp again through the streaks of moonlight. Willard and Ed Cooper, the teamster, watched and listened. The wind had died completely. They would be able to hear any sounds that presaged danger, any low call either of the watching troopers on the lips of the

ravine might make.

It would probably be a long vigil, one lasting through the night, Willard thought. Indians always liked to jump a camp just before dawn. Willard got up and strolled around nervously, leaving Cooper beside the little fire. Johnny Bight approached him.

“Time now?” he asked.

“Time for what, Johnny?” the sergeant asked calmly.

“Time to light tree?”

SO he had decorated the tree and fastened candles to it, had he? But Sergeant Gus Willard did not want that tree lighted. The light flaming against the big rock before which Johnny had put the tree would kill shadows and make the little camp a fine target.

“Orders changed, Johnny,” Willard replied, in the voice of a somewhat stern noncom giving commands. “We’ll light the tree later. I’ll tell you when.”

Johnny fumbled a salute as if Willard had been wearing shoulder insignia instead of chevrons, and turned away. Willard returned to where the teamster was squatting beside the fire.

Three hours passed as the moon and stars wheeled the sky. Willard and Cooper took turns pacing around to stir the blood in their veins, for it had grown colder. Ellison and Jones must be cold up on the lips of the ravine on their cautious guard duty, the sergeant thought.

Twice during those three hours, Johnny Bight approached the sergeant and stiffened and saluted and asked whether he could light his tree now. Willard always told him to wait longer, and Johnny wandered away to squat at the side of the wagon and wait.

Suddenly the sky toward the north became tinged with red. Yells and yips sounded in the far distance.

“They’re dancin’, Sarge!” Cooper said.

“Sounds like it.”

“Startin’ to work themselves up for a smash at us before daybreak. Wonder how many of ‘em are in the bunch?”

“No tellin’,” Willard replied. “Who’s leadin’ ‘em, that’s the important thing. Some cocky young brave with ambitions, maybe. Maybe somebody we can scare off, and maybe not.”

“Had the feelin’ all day we were bein’ followed and watched,” Cooper said. “Well, if they muss us up, a lot of the boys will be spend in’ their Christmas in the field this year.”

“The principal object is,” retorted Willard, “to keep ‘em from mussin’ us up. Me, I’d like to spend a cozy Christmas Eve at Fort Wallace, sittin’ before the fire and maybe sippin’ a hot drink with some kick to it.”

Cooper’s grin could be seen in the light from the fire.

“Not sippin’, Sarge—gulpin’,” the Army teamster corrected.

Brush cracked, and both men sprang to their feet and gripped weapons. They saw Trooper Lew Jones coming through the streaks of moonlight.

“Means trouble,” Cooper said.

The brush cracked in another direction, and they saw Jim Ellison hurrying to the camp. The two men arrived at about the same moment.

“They’ve been dancin’,” Jones reported.

“And now they’ve left the fires and straddled their ponies and are comin’ this way,” Ellison added. “They’re painted—I could see that in the firelight.”

“How many?” Willard asked.

“Looked like maybe a score,” Jones replied.

“Never knew ‘em to jump a camp this time of the night,” Cooper put in.

“Act naturally,” Willard ordered, “but

be ready for quick action. He glanced around and saw Johnny Bight sitting beside the wagon on a fallen log. He thought it best not to try to seize and tie Johnny in the wagon yet. Indian spies might be watching.

Brush cracked on both sides of the ravine. Willard bent over the fire and put the coffee pot in a new place, as if nothing unusual was happening. The others were tense, weapons near at hand.

"They're all around us," Cooper whispered.

"Hit for a dark spot if shootin' starts," Willard replied. "Never knew 'em to shoot without doin' a lot of yellin' first. That's to scare their enemies and whip up their own courage."

It was silent for a moment, not even the brush cracking, and then came a hail from the side of the ravine:

"Chief of Yellowleg Men, I want to talk to you."

Willard glanced around to see his three men in position and Johnny Bight still sitting beside the wagon.

"Who wants to talk to the chief of the Yellowlegs?" Willard called.

"Young Swallow."

"Let Young Swallow come to the fire and greet his friend."

THERE was a short wait, then the brush began cracking again and a painted Indian strode through a streak of moonlight and stalked toward the fire. He wore a headdress to which no doubt he was not entitled. He stood a short distance in front of Willard and the others, his body drawn up and his arms folded across his breast.

"What does my friend want?" Sergeant Willard asked.

"You here are as many as the fingers of one hand, and one of you is sick in the head," Young Swallow orated. "We know

these things. And we are as many as the fingers of four hands, and we have new guns and bullets we got from a trader. If we were to fight, the scalps of the Yellowlegs would soon be in our lodges."

"Why should friends make war?" Willard asked.

"Do as we say, and there will be no war."

"What does Young Swallow want me to do?"

"We want the horses you have, for Yellowlegs always have good ponies. We want those animals you call mules, for they pull great loads. We want all your guns and blankets and bullets. Give us these things, and we will ride away and not cause you trouble. If you do not give them to us, we will kill you all."

"If you attack us, Young Swallow, the Great Father will send many soldiers and hunt you down."

"We will be gone over the hills before the soldiers are ready to come after us," the Indian replied, with scorn. "They are always slow starting."

"Young Swallow must understand that these horses and mules do not belong to us, but to the Great Father. We only use these things when we work. And it is against the laws to give guns and bullets to Indians."

"Enough of talk!" Young Swallow broke in. "My men are in the brush all around you. If I but lift my arm, all of you will die."

"Our medicine is strong," Willard barked at him. "Think for a long time, Young Swallow, before you attack us. The life will be blasted from your bodies."

"Our medicine is strong also! It tells us to take what we want."

"Our medicine is strange as well as strong," Willard told him. Without turning his head, he raised his voice and called: "Johnny Bight! Light your tree—now!"

The Indian did not understand the meaning of the words, and they meant nothing more to him than an unintelligible incantation of a medicine man.

Willard went on talking:

“Our god is angry because you have come here painted for war and demanded things you should not have. So we will make our powerful medicine, and you will be destroyed if you do not get on your ponies and ride away. Our medicine is strange medicine, such as you never saw before.”

The sergeant was orating to kill time, and from the corner of his eye he glanced toward the huge boulder before which Johnny Bight had set his tree. And he saw a match flicker, a tiny spurt of flame, saw the match carried from one taper to another.

As Willard talked on, the light grew in volume and was reflected by the flat surface of the huge boulder. It gleamed on red and green ornaments which caught the high lights and sent color to stain the rock also. And on the top of the tree the star Johnny Bight had fastened there and draped with tinsel gleamed and flashed like a thing alive.

“Look!” Sergeant Gus Willard shouted, waving his arm in the direction of the tree. “Our medicine! Our God speaks! Did Young Swallow and his men ever see medicine like that? It will begin working in a moment. The young Cheyennes will be dead men!”

AN EXPRESSION of terror came into Young Swallow’s face. From the brush came a chorus of exclamations, a quick jabbering of hysterical language, and the brush began cracking.

Over by the fire, Johnny Bight began shouting in a squeaky, uncertain voice with a note of hysteria in it. He began dancing up and down in front of the illuminated tree.

Young Swallow shouted to his men, turned and fled. The troopers heard them crashing through the brush as they yelled at one another. A moment later came the muffled sounds of hoofbeats as the Indians began a rapid retreat.

“Catch a little rest,” Sergeant Willard told the others. “We’ll start for Fort Wallace at dawn.”