



He grasped the war bridle
with one hand as the horse
reared

Buckskin Santa Claus

By JOHNSTON McCULLY

*Christmas Eve at Fort Bent seemed a long-chance bet to
Scout Reilly as he read sign ahead of the wagon train!*

COLD wind stung Tim Reilly as he kicked at his pony's ribs with the heels of his moccasins and urged the mount up the hill through the snow-sprinkled brush.

Winding along the base of the hill was the frozen creek. On this side was a level clearing of quite some extent where the wagon train could be corralled, a position that could be defended easily. On the opposite side, where the bank was about

ten feet high, was a growth of thick, stunted trees which would furnish good cover for enemies.

It was within an hour of sunset. This day had been another in the long list of days during which misjudgment of the wagon train boss, accidents, two Indian attacks, and an epidemic among oxen and horses had delayed the train until here it was caught within a short distance of Bent's Fort on the day before Christmas.

Tim Reilly was the guide. He was a good guide, with much experience. He had an uncanny way of smelling trouble before it happened. He had just caught the whiff of it down by the creek. There, he had seen fresh Indian sign. He also had seen the hoofprints of a shod horse, fresh prints that had been made not more than a couple of hours before. Stamped in the frozen ground, they had acted to Reilly as warning signals of danger.

Now he was hurrying back to join the train and make his report. He had been scouting ahead since early morning, and was tired and cold and hungry. And he knew he faced another ordeal, a quarrel with stern John Stedman, the wagon train boss, who perhaps meant well, but lacked experience and felt his importance too much to be a good train boss.

Reilly dreaded what he must tell John Stedman and the others. After the long delays, the blizzard through which they had passed, the cold nights, they were eager to get to Bent's Fort and rest there until the spring thaws opened the Santa Fe trail. They had hoped to be at the Fort for Christmas Eve. That would be tonight. And they would have to camp beside the frozen creek in a wind-swept clearing, only a few miles from the destination they had hoped to reach.

"Maybe we can be at the fort by noon tomorrow," Tim Reilly muttered to himself as his pony struggled up the frozen hill. "That'll make it a fine Christmas, to my way of thinkin'."

HE WONDERED how Martha Blake had made out during the day. She had started from the Missouri River with her father. The Blake wagon was filled mostly with cheap trade stuff. Her father had some wild idea of selling it at a tremendous profit, or trading it to the Indians for valuable furs. He had been the

sort of man who refused to listen to reason or profit by the experience of those who knew.

Two months before, he had been hurt badly while the men of the train were trying to save a wagon that had tumbled over a cliff. Four days after being hurt, he had died, leaving his daughter Martha alone in the world with her wagon filled with useless trash. The oxen were good, and she had decided to go on with the train. Perhaps, she had said, she could sell the wagon and its cargo and the oxen at Bent's Fort, and get some sort of position there. It was too late to turn back.

Tim Reilly confessed to himself that he was in love with plucky Martha Blake, and had been since he had seen her first a day before the wagon train started westward. But he had tried not to show it, and had not spoken to her of it. If she guessed the state of his feelings, she only smiled softly and kept silent. Her eyes glowed when she watched him. But the guide had a tremendous responsibility, and no time for thoughts of love. She knew that, and waited.

Now, Tim Reilly topped the hill and saw the wagon train crawling toward him over the frozen land less than a mile away. In the silhouette against the scarlet western sky, he sat straight in the saddle while he gave his pony a breathing spell after the climb. He held his right hand high, and signaled.

His tall, lithe body had muscles like fine steel. His keen eyes could survey the country knowingly for miles. He could read men as well as trail sign. He was a good shot with the flintlock musket he carried, and it was a legend along the trail what he could do with a knife.

His pony rested, Reilly urged him forward again. The frozen ground was swept almost bare of snow here, revealing the deep ruts other passing wagon trains

had made when the ground had been soft. He made good time back to the train.

John Stedman and another man rode out to meet him. Tim Reilly's face grew grim as they neared each other. He disliked having quarrels with the arrogant Stedman, but they could not be avoided. Reilly had to be firm at times, for the safety of the wagon train was charged to him as much as to Stedman.

Stedman and the other man pulled up their horses beside a clump of brush and waited for Reilly to join them. Stedman was a huge man of fifty, with gray hair, a florid face and an aggressive manner. He had made a small fortune trading on the Missouri, and now was taking five wagons of merchandise to trade in Santa Fe. Ownership of the five wagons and his air of authority had resulted in his being elected train boss.

"Thought you were never comin' back to the train, Reilly," Stedman said when they met, his tone one of rebuke.

"It took a lot of lookin' today," Reilly replied.

"Well, man, speak up! How much farther is it to Bent's Fort? How is the trail ahead? Can we make the fort before dark?"

"It's sunset now," Reilly pointed out. "The fort is still half a day's march away."

"A few hours after dark won't be too bad," Stedman decided. "There'll be a bright moon tonight unless the snow clouds gather."

Reilly sighed at the explosion he knew must come, then straightened in his saddle again and spoke. "Half a mile ahead is a frozen creek. Swing the train to the left, where there's a gradual slope. Follow the old ruts. On this side of the creek is a clearing where the train could be defended easily. We'll corral the wagons there."

"Are you mad, man? Everybody wants to push on to the fort. We can travel

through the early part of the night."

"The creek is shallow, but the ice won't bear the weight of the wagons, even one at a time," Tim Reilly explained. "The ice will have to be broken, and that'll take considerable time. And I smelt trouble."

"You're always smellin' trouble, to hear you tell it."

"I'm responsible for the train as much as you," Reilly said, his eyes blazing. "The opposite side of the creek has a grove of trees. If Indians are lurkin' there, and catch the train when it's tryin' to cross the creek—"

"Indians again!" Stedman scoffed. "You seem powerful afraid of Indians."

"They've jumped us twice since we left Independence, if you'll remember," Reilly pointed out. "They cost us two wagons, four mules, six oxen and three men dead. Do you want to add to that score?"

"So you want us to camp out this cold night in the open beside a frozen creek?"

"I do," Reilly replied. "And we'd better corral the wagons and have guards through the night. No more fires than are necessary for cooking—and everybody keep away from the fires as much as possible, so they won't be good targets."

"Reilly, when we get to the fort, I'm goin' to complain about you to Colonel Bent," Stedman declared.

"That won't annoy me any," Reilly told him. "We'll have to stay at the Fort until the thaws, and durin' that time Colonel Bent can study you and decide between us. He knows me already."

"Suppose I order that the train go on tonight?"

"Then, accordin' to regulations, I'll tell my report to the men of the train and let them vote on what they want to do. Stedman, it's your fault we're away behind schedule, that we'll have to winter at the Fort. You don't know the trail, and

won't listen to men who do know it. You're arrogant and arbitrary."

"That's enough, you young whelp!"

"I'm goin' to do all I can to get the train to the fort safely, Stedman. Do you give the order to camp at the creek, or must I give my report to the men and let them vote?"

"Oh, we'll stop at the creek!" Stedman decided. "And I'll put the blame for it on you. It won't make you any more popular."

The other man had not spoken, but his glance told Reilly that he was not friendly toward Stedman. The three started riding to the approaching train abreast, Reilly on Stedman's right.

"I crossed the creek and scouted the woods," Reilly went on. "Plenty of tracks. Injuns had been there, and had ridden back out of sight, probably over the first hill."

"And if we camp at the creek we'll be just where they want us, if they really want to jump us," Stedman scoffed.

"If we scatter out and string the wagons and try to cross the creek after breakin' the ice, they'll get us one wagon at a time," Reilly said. "We'd be helpless. They'll think twice before they attack a corralled wagon train this close to the fort. And Indians never attack at night—though they'll swipe at us if there's no danger they'll get killed. There's somethin' else, too."

"Let's have it," Stedman snapped.

"I said I saw tracks—plenty of tracks of Injun ponies. But I saw other tracks, too—of a shod horse. Only a white man's mount would make tracks like that."

"What about it?"

"Have you forgotten Seth Collier?" Reilly asked.

Stedman laughed. "Still got the idea that Seth Collier has turned renegade?" he asked.

"I'd never accuse a white man of doin'

that unless I had facts," Reilly answered. "But I have my suspicions."

THEY reached the train, and in a loud voice Stedman gave the order to bear to the left, where the ruts of the trail ran down an easy slope to the creek. Men shouted and women called, asking how much farther it was to the fort, how soon they would reach it and feel safe, and be warm and well fed. The ration of provisions had been scant for some time.

Tim Reilly loped along the line of slowly-moving wagons to reach the one Martha Blake was driving. He was thinking of Seth Collier, a wild youngster of twenty-three who had started from the Missouri with the train, paying a fee to ride with it and under its protection. He was going to join the wild mountain men near Taos and trap beaver, he had said.

He had been a pest from the start, disinclined to obey Stedman's orders, refusing to do his proper share of the work, riding away to scout around without asking permission. And he had made himself a nuisance by forcing his attentions on Martha Blake, grieving over the death of her father.

Stedman had rebuked him sternly for that in front of the others, and they had quarreled bitterly. It had ended by Seth Collier taking some provisions and leaving the train, saying he could make better time alone and not be bothered by company he disliked. They would find him waiting at Bent's Fort, he had told them.

Tim Reilly had noticed how along the trail, Seth Collier had always cultivated the friendship of the Indians they encountered, had given them presents. During an attack by Arapahos and another by Utes, both small affairs compared to what other wagon trains had encountered, Seth Collier had ridden behind a wagon and had not fired a shot. He had acted like

a reckless, wild, young buck himself, the sort who might turn renegade and lead savages against his own kind for either revenge or profit or both.

Reilly swung his horse beside the Blake wagon, and Martha gave him a tired smile.

“How much farther, Tim?” she asked.

“We camp for the night half a mile from here, beside a frozen creek, Martha. It’s necessary. We can make the fort by noon tomorrow, Christmas Day. I had another row with Stedman when I ordered the stop. I don’t like the looks of things ahead.”

“Then I’m glad we’re to stop, Tim. Oh, I’ll be glad to get to the fort! To rest, without fear and worry, be warm, have plenty of food—”

“I know,” he said. “Colonel Bent will make everybody welcome and comfortable. And if he is away, his manager will do the same.”

“You think there is some danger tonight?” she asked.

“It’s best to be careful and prepared,” he replied.

Stedman shouted for him, and he loped away from her wagon to go to the head of the train and direct it down to the clearing beside the creek.

The wagons were corralled and the oxen and mules kept inside the circle. Small fires were built outside the circle at a short distance from the wagons, and food was prepared quickly. The starlit night had come, and a full moon was just coming up behind the distant hills.

There was no disturbance as the evening meal was prepared and eaten. Tim Reilly ate with Martha Blake and a couple of middle-aged women and their husbands, as he did usually. He always cared for Martha’s oxen when he could.

There was some growling among the men when Stedman ordered that the fires

be not built up to warm the camp. The guide had said it would make the scene too light, Stedman told them, and the guide was afraid of an Indian attack. He threw the blame for their discomfort upon Reilly.

“What Tim Reilly says is all right with me!” some man shouted at Stedman from the darkness. “If everybody had listened to him, we wouldn’t have been caught out in the open in the winter.”

Stedman bridled at this show of mutiny. “Who said that?” he shouted.

“I said it—me, Bill Anderson!” the voice roared from the darkness near one of the wagons. “And plenty of others think like I do. I reckon we’ll have another election and get us a new wagon train boss before we go on from Bent’s Fort in the spring.”

REILLY wanted no part of the quarrel. All the men were tired and irritable. He crept beneath one of the wagons and got outside the circle and stood in a spot of shadow.

Reilly moved along the wagons to the quieter side of the camp, his eyes searching the shadows, his ears strained for any sounds across the frozen creek. To his ears came a sibilant sound any other man in the train might not have heard. Reilly understood it. His attention was being attracted.

One of the guards was stretched on the ground with buffalo robes beneath and over him, and Reilly walked to him quickly.

“Watch, but don’t shoot unless I yell or somebody fires from the brush,” he whispered. “Somebody out there is callin’ me.”

“I didn’t hear anything,” the guard said.

“I did. Don’t get nervous and spoil everything.”

Reilly stepped boldly out into the

bright moonlight. He heard the sibilant sound again, and knew it came from a clump of brush not far away. And now he heard guttural words.

“Me Injun Joe.”

“Come on in to camp,” Reilly called guardedly in reply.

“No likeum camp. You come. Plenty safe.”

Reilly was carrying his musket, and now he suddenly held it ready to fire. Step by step, he went toward the clump of brush. Injun Joe was a halfbreed Reilly had befriended a couple of years before. Joe spent most of his time around Bent’s Fort.

The breed was stretched on the ground, but he arose to a crouching posture when Reilly neared him. Reilly crouched beside him in the darkness.

“I am glad to see my friend and brother again,” Reilly said. “But how does he come to be out here in the cold night far from the fort?”

“Have news for my brother,” Injun Joe replied. “Kiowa young men wear paint. They are across the creek among the trees. Will raid when wagon train people sleep.”

“They won’t attack before dawn. We’ll be ready for them,” Reilly said.

“That is good. I hear young Kiowa men talk in village near fort. Make big talk, like young fools.”

“How many?” Reilly asked.

“Maybe twice all your fingers.”

“If they attack, we’ll handle ‘em. Thanks, Joe, for letting me know.”

“Joe know for three days you come with this train. Young Kiowa men know. Old Chief, Lame Eagle, not know what young men do. White man make plan for young Kiowa men.”

“A white man? You’re sure, Joe?”

“Sure. He make friends with young Kiowa men. Give presents. Give bottles and tobacco. You got bottle?”

“Not for you, Joe. You know better than to ask me that. But here is a stick of tobacco.” Reilly handed it over after getting it out of a pocket. “You’d better slip away, Joe, and get back to the fort. If they learn you’ve warned me—”

“Can fool young Kiowa fools any time,” Joe boasted. “Me go. You tell wagon train men watch and guard. Joe see you at fort tomorrow.”

Reilly waited until Joe had slipped away through the shadows, then walked out into the moonlight boldly and strode toward the wagon train and the guard to whom he had spoken. He found John Stedman standing beside the guard in the darkness.

“Where have you been, Reilly?” Stedman demanded.

“Just lookin’ around.”

“The guard says somebody called you.”

“That’s right. Injun Joe, a breed friend of mine who stays around Bent’s Fort most of the time. He gave me some interestin’ news. Said some young Kiowas were in the trees across the creek, waitin’ to jump us after dawn. Just like I expected.”

“We’ll be prepared for ‘em,” Stedman said. “Anything else?”

“He said that some white man had given the young Kiowas presents of whiskey and tobacco and had planned the raid, and that the old chief, Lame Eagle, didn’t know anything about it.”

“White man? Reilly, I’m warnin’ you that I’ve got my eyes on you. You mean Seth Collier, of course. You and him were both after the Blake girl, rivals. After he left the train, you began to blacken him.”

“It didn’t need me to blacken him.”

“Seems to me you’re over friendly with the Injuns, Reilly.”

“What do you mean by that, Stedman?” Reilly demanded, with a trace

of anger in his manner.

“You sneak out of the camp and talk to a breed—admit it yourself. How do we know you’re not the white man involved? Maybe you were givin’ him the layout of the camp here. Maybe you’ll be missin’ if the raid starts—”

“That’s enough!” Reilly snapped. “When the train’s safe at the Fort, I’ll call you to account for this talk. Meantime, you keep away from me, Stedman, except when it’s necessary to talk business. I’ve had about enough of you!”

REILLY stalked away angrily, going inside the circle of wagons. Everybody was preparing for the night, the men looking to their weapons. Reilly saw that Stedman had stationed guards.

Martha Blake was sitting on a box in front of her wagon, looking up at the starlit sky. Reilly stopped beside her.

“Better get some sleep,” he suggested.

“I was watching the stars and moon and thinking that tomorrow is Christmas,” she replied. “I never expected to spend a Christmas Eve like this.”

“Tomorrow will make up for it,” Reilly told her. “They’ll have a special Christmas dinner at the fort. Chickens and wild game, jams and jellies made from wild berries. There’ll be a tree, and I’m goin’ to hang a present on it for you. It’ll be an extra big celebration ‘cause the wagon train will be there. The people at the fort are always glad to see a wagon train come.”

“And we’ll stay there the rest of the winter,” she added. “If I can find anything to do, I’ll remain there. You’ll go on with the train, Tim?”

“Unless somethin’ happens to change my plans,” he replied, sitting down beside her. “Even if I do have to go on to Santa Fe as I promised, I can come back to the fort quick enough. Maybe I’ll quit bein’ a

guide and settle down. Colonel Bent has offered me a good job. Wants me to take charge of his fur trappers. I could live at the fort all the time, ‘cept when I was out on trips watchin’ the trappers.”

“Oh, Tim, that’d be grand!” she said.

“Maybe at the fort where I won’t have to be doin’ a guide’s work, we’ll have time to get better acquainted,” he hinted.

“I’d like that, Tim,” she confessed.

He could see her eyes sparkling in the moonlight, and got up quickly.

“You’d better get into your wagon and go to sleep,” he told her. “I’ll be up all night, I suppose, but I can get sleep tomorrow after we get to the fort.”

He helped her to her feet, and she got into the wagon as Reilly hurried away. What a Christmas Eve for her, he was thinking! But he was hoping that Christmas Day would be better.

The camp was quiet. The guards were stretched beneath wagons around the circle, keenly alert, weapons held ready. They were watching shadows, listening to alien sounds.

Reilly strolled around, warning men against lighting their pipes from flaring bits of pitch. A tiny flame would make a good target, he explained.

He encountered Stedman again. The train boss was making the rounds of the guards.

“Got any late news from your Injun Joe?” Stedman asked.

“I suppose he’s back at the fort by this time,” Reilly replied.

“Better than sleepin’ out here in the open cold, all fussed up about an Indian attack,” Stedman remarked.

“We should have been at the Fort long before winter set in,” Reilly hinted.

“How could we make speed when you wanted to stop and camp every time you heard a noise in the brush?” Stedman asked. “In my estimation, we could have

gone on today and been there before midnight. Been havin' the Christmas Eve celebration right now. Think what you missed, Reilly? You could have played Santa Claus—a Santa Claus in buckskin.”

“Maybe I can do that tomorrow,” Reilly replied. He left the train boss and went on around the circle of wagons.

He stopped at times to watch and listen. Below the camp, the frozen creek was like a lane of silver in the moonlight. No shadows dotted its surface. It was about fifty yards wide at this point. If the Indians rushed across; it, they would make good targets, moving black splotches against the background of silvery white.

Reilly looked at the fringe of brush upstream and downstream. Upstream was a sharp bend in the creek. The enemy could cross there under cover, creep through the brush and get near the circled wagons.

In a dark spot, Reilly crawled beneath a wagon and squirmed his way from the corral, getting behind the nearest clump of brush. He stopped and listened, then went on. Through breaks in the brush, he could see the frozen creek glistening in the moonlight.

NO SOUNDS came from the grove of trees across the creek. The wind had come up and was blowing downstream toward where Reilly was crouching, and it carried no sounds to him either. But that did not mean there was no danger. A clever young Kiowa could approach like a shadow.

Reilly got where brush broke the force of the wind, and remained there in the spot of darkness. He was thinking of Christmas again, and of Martha Blake.

It was time for him to stop living the perilous and adventurous life of a trail guide and settle down, he told himself. Life with Martha as his wife would be a

good thing for him. If close association at the fort made them incline toward marriage, he would accept Colonel Bent's offer, build a good cabin, and start a new life as a sedate married man.

The moon wheeled the sky. Reilly penetrated farther into the brush, changing position whenever he felt the cold creeping into his body. He did not see anything to give him alarm. He stayed out all night, scouting, moving from one place to another. When dawn began to break, he started back cautiously to the wagon train. He crawled beneath one of the wagons to get inside the circle. There he found John Stedman and two of the older men waiting for him.

“Where have you been, Reilly?” Stedman demanded.

“Out scoutin’.”

“See or hear anything?”

“Nothin’ unusual,” Reilly replied.

“Reilly, we've been talkin' about you,” Stedman told him. “We don't like the looks of things. This is twice you've been out of the camp since we corralled the wagons. You admitted the first time that you'd been talkin' to an Indian.”

“A halfbreed friend of mine,” Reilly corrected. “He lives at the fort.”

“I wouldn't trust one of 'em as far as I could see with my eyes shut,” Stedman declared. “Nor anybody who associates with 'em.”

“What do you mean by that?” Reilly demanded, angrily.

“Reilly, you delayed us so we'd have to spend the night in this open space on the creek. You gave us an Indian scare for reason. Twice, you've crept out of camp. Frankly, I think that you're in league with the Indians—you, instead of another man you've suggested might be.”

“That's enough!” Reilly stormed. “Since we left the Missouri, I've endured your tantrums to get the wagon train

through. I've stood for your ignorance and arrogance. Every move you've made has delayed us. We should have been to Santa Fe before this, and we're not even at Bent's Fort. We're in country where the Shawnees, Arapahos, Kiowas and even Utes prowl around. And it's a cold winter, and any of 'em may raid at any time."

"Maybe that's the way you want it," Stedman suggested. "We've got some valuable stuff in this wagon train. It'd be quite a haul for a renegade and his red friends."

"Are you callin' me a renegade?" Reilly roared at him. "If you were a younger man—"

Stedman held up his hand. "We can have a full investigation at the fort," he interrupted.

"That suits me. Colonel Bent knows me well. He'll blister you with words if you accuse me."

"Meanwhile, Reilly, I can't afford to take chances," Stedman continued. "I'm puttin' you under arrest until we reach the fort tomorrow. Hand me your musket and knife."

Tim Reilly drew in his breath sharply, choked back his blind rage.

"Are you mad, Stedman?" he asked. "If you want my musket and knife, try to take 'em! Any more of your foolishness, and maybe I'll put you under arrest yourself. Most of the men would stand by me if I did."

"Are you goin' to hand me your musket and knife and submit without trouble?" Stedman asked.

"I am not! I may need them both before daylight, and it'll be daylight in an hour or so more."

STEDMAN advanced a step and started to say something more. But the words died in his throat. One of the guards gave a wild yell, and his musket exploded. And

from the brush upstream came wild warwhoops as the young Kiowas opened fire at the wagon train.

Tim Reilly forgot his quarrel with Stedman. This was his business, and he took immediate charge of the battle. The Kiowas remained in the brush instead of charging the wagons. That told Reilly something.

"Watch the downstream side!" he yelled at some of the men. "And watch the creek. They'll be comin' at us from another direction."

Bullets were flying around the wagons. Fire arrows came arching out of the brush, and their flight was watched carefully by those out of the wagon train, and they were extinguished as they fell. If a wagontop caught fire, the corral would be illuminated and the defenders would be plain targets.

Reilly ran from wagon to wagon, seeing that men were not hurt, that they had ammunition. Some of the women huddled behind wagons to reload guns. A few Indians started rushing across the creek, and the defenders of the train gave them a hot fire.

During a lull, Reilly heard a voice from the brush upstream. It spoke a few words of Kiowa, but Reilly knew the voice was that of a white man. Seth Collier, he guessed. To capture the renegade was a necessary exploit if it could be accomplished.

Reilly darted to the wagons on the side of the circle away from the creek. He found Stedman blocking his path.

"Where are you goin'?" the train boss asked.

"Out to catch a renegade," Reilly snapped at him. "I heard a white man shoutin' out there."

"You'll stay right here with us!" Stedman ordered. "You won't run out to help your hellish savage friends."

As two other men came running, Reilly's fist crashed on Stedman's chin, sending him sprawling to the ground. It was no time for argument. He had heard the white man's voice ordering the Kiowas to prepare to charge on all sides.

He got between two of the wagons and ran to the protection of the nearest clump of brush. Two young Indians appeared in the fringe of brush not far away. Reilly took careful aim as they started to move forward. His musket spat fire, and one of the Kiowas spun around and crashed to the frozen ground.

The charge started, and the men of the wagon train kept up a furious fire. A few of the enemy were charging toward the corralled wagons from the downstream side. The charge directly across the creek had been abandoned, and two dark figures sprawled on the ice.

Reilly reloaded and worked farther into the thick brush, watching and listening. The Kiowas had retreated on all sides, and it was full daylight. The attack had failed. The young men of the tribe, who had been promised an easy victory, had run into a prepared defense and had all they could stomach.

Reilly heard the white man's voice again, and began making his way cautiously in the direction from which it came. He could tell that the white man was urging another attack, and the Kiowas were refusing. Yells dwindled into nothing as the Indians retreated with the coming of day.

REILLY crouched behind a bunch of brush as he heard hoofbeats. Less than twenty feet away, a rider emerged from the brush, going upstream. He was a white man naked from the waist up, his body painted, a war bonnet upon his head. Reilly recognized him at once—Seth Collier.

So, as he had suspected, Collier was the renegade who had coaxed the young Kiowas to make the raid. No doubt he had been a frequent visitor to the Kiowa village while living at the fort. And Reilly suspected that it was a part of Collier's plan to abduct Martha Blake during the fighting, leaving the loot of the wagons to the misguided men he led.

The Kiowas, Reilly knew, were peaceful. Their old chief, Lame Eagle, was friendly with Colonel Bent. This affair would touch on Lame Eagle's honor. If he got his hands on Seth Collier, the renegade would be subjected to torture before death.

Reilly saw that Collier was looking around through the brush. Musket held ready, Reilly sprang out into the open.

"I want you, Collier, you renegade!" Reilly shouted.

Collier jerked his head around, raised the musket he carried and fired quickly, and missed. Reilly fired an instant later. The Indian pony Collier was riding bareback swerved at the instant, and Reilly missed the target also.

He dashed to the horse and grasped the war bridle rope with one hand as he got his knife out with the other. The pony reared, and Collier sprang off his back to keep from being thrown. Collier had his knife out also.

They met and clashed, and their knife hilts locked. They tugged and strained to get the advantage. Neither spoke, for they could guess at each other's thoughts.

Reilly slipped on the frozen ground, and felt Collier's knife rip into his left shoulder. The burning streak of pain infuriated him, and he continued the fray with increased fury. Collier retreated, gasping. Reilly drove him back against a ledge of rock. Then, he spoke: "I could kill you easy, Collier. But I aim to take you to the fort alive. The men there will deal with you."

Collier knew what that would mean, and his fear gave him an unusual fury. He took the initiative and drove Reilly back for a dozen feet. Then Reilly stood his ground. Their knife hilts locked again, and they tugged and strained. As they parted, Reilly saw the chance for which he had been waiting, and his knife slashed Collier's right arm from shoulder to wrist.

Collier reeled into the brush and sank to the ground. Reilly was growing weak from loss of blood from his own wound. But he picked up his heavy musket and ran to Collier, who was trying to get up on his feet. He swung the musket once, and Collier went to the ground senseless.

It was some hours later when Tim Reilly came within sight of Bent's Fort. He heard men shouting around the gate, and two jumped on ponies and hurried out to meet him.

Loss of blood had brought unconsciousness to him after he had bound Collier's ankles and legs. He had recovered to find the renegade still senseless and groaning, and the Indian pony standing not far away.

Reilly got Collier across the saddle and lashed him there. He led the pony to the camp, to find that the wagon train had crossed the creek and gone on. So he had followed, leading the pony and with the unconscious renegade across the saddle.

One of the men who rode out from the fort mounted him, and the other spurred back with the news. Reilly was half dazed from weakness when they came to the gate. Most of the men and women of the fort were there, and he saw Chief Lame Eagle and many of his braves.

He saw the wagons of the train, heard the glad cry of Martha Blake, and then

realized that Colonel Bent was striding toward him.

"Glad to see you alive, my boy," Bent greeted. "This man Stedman has been tryin' to tell me that you're a renegade."

"I brought in the real one," Reilly muttered.

"Knew you would! Lame Eagle has been telling me he knew nothing of the attack of the young men. He has seen this man Collier around his village, talking to the youngsters. Collier got here some time ago and has been living at the fort. Get off that pony and come in. Have a hot bath, get your wound fixed up, have a snort of whiskey, and get ready to eat Christmas dinner."

"That'll come in handy," Reilly said, grinning.

"We heard the wagon train was almost here, so we delayed our Christmas tree doin's, Reilly. We'll have it this evenin', and you can be Santa Claus."

"I'm willin'," Reilly said, grinning again. He was looking at Martha, who stood not far away. He read the message in her face, and turned to Colonel Bent again.

"If that job offered me is still open, I'll take it, Colonel Bent," he said.

"The job's yours."

"I've had enough of bein' a guide. Want to sorta settle down."

"Don't blame you," Bent told him. "But the people of this train—they don't think much of Mr. Stedman's judgment, and they want you to take the train on to Santa Fe in the spring. Do that, then come back and take the job."

"That'll be fine," Reilly said, looking at Martha again. "The trip to Santa Fe and back would be a right good honeymoon."