

# New Year's Decision



by  
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*When the Comanches gather to attack,  
Trooper Sperry faces a hard problem!*

**A**T POST headquarters at Fort Wallace, an orderly stepped through the door and tacked a sheet of paper on the official bulletin board.

By that simple act, he unconsciously started a train of events that upset a diabolical scheme for murder and loot created by Swift Lizard, a Comanche sub-chief who was a reservation malcontent. It also resulted in the arrest and punishment of a renegade trader, and turned a no-good yellowleg into a proper soldier and a man.

Having put the notice in position, the orderly darted back inside. It was the

The Indians were  
between Sperry  
and the post

*J. Dineen*

middle of the afternoon on the last day of the year, and the steady wind that swept down upon the post from the rolling Kansas hills had a bite to it.

The sky was clear and the sun was bright. An inch of frozen snow splotted the ground. A lower temperature no doubt would come with the night. But there would be a rather hot New Year's Eve party at the post to alleviate the cold.

Captain Richard Thole, post commander, was a good sort. He knew that men and women cooped up by winter needed something to break a dreary monotony. In addition to his troopers, who kept in touch with Fort Hay in one direction and Sheridan City on the other, making Fort Wallace a sort of halfway liaison point, the post now sheltered officers' ladies and troopers' wives and children, several traders waiting to make the trip to Sheridan City on the new Kansas Pacific railroad, an assortment of lazy Indians who did nothing but loaf and beg, and a couple of land speculators.

Captain Thole had held a celebration at the post on Christmas, but that had been a sedate affair. His New Year's Eve party would be the opposite. There would be a dance, food and drink for all, a measure of free liquor for every man in uniform, a lot of noise at midnight, and a big bonfire to be kindled on the parade ground as the new year was born.

**T**WO troopers going from their quarters to the canteen to build a basis for the liquid refreshment to come during the evening, paused before the bulletin board and inspected the orderly's work.

It was an official order signed by Captain Thole. It read:

SPECIAL GUARD DETAIL  
NEW YEAR'S EVE

Inside post-Jones, Murphy, Green, Edwards.  
Outside patrol-Sperry and Hamlin.

"Hamlin, 'cause he got drunk on Christmas, and Sperry, 'cause he's plain ornery," one of the troopers said.

"Tough," the other soldier commented. "Havin' to hit their saddles and ride patrol away from the post on a cold night."

"Two men do it every night, don't they?"

"Right! But tonight, when everybody inside will be havin' fun! Think of the free drink and grub they'll miss. They'll be near enough to hear the music and see the bonfire, yet away from it. 'S tough!"

The troopers wandered on to the canteen to tell other yellowlegs there that Sperry and Hamlin had drawn outside patrol for New Year's Eve.

At that moment, Jed Sperry was ignorant of the blow Fate had dealt him. He was behind a log barracks filling a canteen with whisky from a bottle he had managed to steal in the post canteen the night before during the confusion caused by a brawl between two troopers.

He intended to have a wet New Year's Eve, and that called for more than the few drinks the captain would serve. And Jed Sperry's credit at the official post canteen was nil; he had overdrawn his monthly allotment, and Captain Thole had ordered the sutler to give no extra credit.

Jed Sperry was tall and slender, with red hair and eyes that could have been called green. He could be a raging demon one moment and a docile babe the next. His attire was always slovenly, his equipment always calling the maledictions of Sergeant Tim Mahoney down upon him. He cared for his mount well enough, but that was because he liked horses, army or otherwise.

In the army, Sperry was a misfit. He had joined up right after the War Between the States because he disliked hard work on his uncle's farm, and had the mistaken belief that army life was a loafing job

except when it came to a fight. Jed Sperry liked to fight.

But there had been no fighting since he had joined up, except a few brushes with small bands of roving Indians which had amounted to little in the way of excitement. Sperry had found army life a monotony of moving whenever a bugle blew, of standing guard, going on fuel and water details, cleaning stables—a life that to him made a farm seem like a rest home.

He couldn't get out of it without deserting, and he didn't want to do that. He had witnessed what had happened to a couple of deserters, and hadn't liked it.

The one bright spot in his life at the post was Sally Mahoney, Sergeant Mahoney's blonde daughter. She smiled upon him at times, and might have taken him seriously if Sperry had been more worth while. But even Sally Mahoney could not brace him up. And Sperry considered her father, the gruff old sergeant who had lived through the war, his particular enemy.

He didn't realize that Mahoney saw good in him and was trying to wake him up and bring it out. In Mahoney's criticisms he saw only the gruff orders of an overbearing man who had a brief moment of authority. The sergeant was always "picking on him," he told those of his comrades who would listen.

Behind the barracks building, Jed Sperry continued his preparations for the evening celebration. He filled the canteen and cracked the empty bottle on a rock, and bundled the filled canteen up in a blanket he had with him.

He intended to cache the canteen in a certain place, and get it out after collecting what free drinks he could. But he was going to slick up some and have a couple of dances with Sally Mahoney before he got around to serious drinking, he promised himself.

WITH the canteen wrapped in the blanket and the blanket beneath his arm, Trooper Jed Sperry went around to the front of the barracks and started across the parade ground toward the stables.

He didn't want to be seen by the stable guard, for he intended to hide the whisky-filled canteen in a grain bin. So his manner was rather furtive. He glanced around continually and tried to walk gently so his boot soles would not squeak on the frozen snow.

He went quietly around a corner of the building, hoping to slip in at a rear door, and came to an abrupt stop. Standing against the wall of the stable was a blanketed Indian; Sperry knew him for a lazy Comanche who hung around the post most of the time to beg or steal.

In front of the Comanche stood a portly man of middle age, who had a liquor-reddened face decorated with a large black mustache. He was Harley Baker, reputed to be a trader, and also reputed to be careless when it came to a scrupulousness in his business dealings.

Baker was loud-mouthed and bombastic, and got sarcastic at times. Even if he did buy free drinks for troopers frequently, Jed Sperry did not like him. He wondered why Captain Thole tolerated the man in the post. Baker drove away with his wagon at times, and drifted back again, supposedly always on his way between the railroad at Sheridan City and the Fort Hay district. Sperry had certain suspicions about the trader, and seeing Baker in secret conversation with a Comanche did not allay those suspicions a bit.

The friendly wind carried Baker's talk to Sperry's ears.

"Swift Lizard won't be friends with me, when I could do so much for him," Baker was telling the Comanche. "Remember what I've told you. Think of the revenge Swift Lizard could have on the

yellowlegs. Plenty of ponies, too, and grub and heap firewater. Big fire, and the post wiped out.”

“Why you tell me?” the Comanche asked.

“So you can tell Swift Lizard, and he’ll know I am his friend and trade with me. Tell him that after his work is done I’ll show him where to find the firewater and grub and the army ponies. Plenty pretty things, too.”

The Comanche caught sight of Sperry and grunted a word of alarm. Baker turned swiftly, and to him it looked as if Sperry had just stepped around the corner of the building. He whispered something to the Comanche, and the Indian pulled his blanket up to his ears and shuffled away.

“Hello, Sperry!” the trader greeted. “Been wishin’ I had a chance to talk to you.”

“What about?” Sperry asked.

“Oh, I—I just think you’re gettin’ a bad deal around here. Noticed a few minutes ago that you’re posted for outside patrol tonight—on New Year’s Eve.”

“What?” Rage was expressed in that one word. “I didn’t know that.”

“List is on the bulletin board. They’re sure rubbin’ it in on you, Sperry. Old Sarge Mahoney, of course. Makin’ a man ride around all night a few miles from where they’re havin’ fun. It’ll be cold tonight, too.”

“What can I do about it?” Sperry asked.

“I don’t know. But I’d get square with ‘em, if I were you.”

“What’s the powwow you were havin’ with that lazy Injun?”

“That?” Baker laughed. “I’ve got it in for Swift Lizard, the young hothead who’s chasin’ around the hills with a band of young men. Just buildin’ up some trouble for him. He won’t trade with me. I’m fixin’ to get Swift Lizard into trouble. I

always get square with them as ain’t on my side.”

“Got to be goin’—got somethin’ to do,” Sperry said.

“Drop into the canteen a little later, and I’ll buy you a New Year’s drink. You’ll need it, ridin’ patrol tonight.”

“I’ll be there,” Sperry replied.

HE SHUFFLED on to the corner of the stable as Baker hurried away. He knew he should go to the captain and report what he had heard. But he was enraged at the thought of riding patrol.

He would miss the dances with Sally Mahoney, the fancy grub, the free drinks, the music and bonfire. The sergeant had arranged it, the mean scut! Sergeant Mahoney always made out the special details and the captain merely signed them.

Sperry got into the stable and hid the whisky in the grain bin. He got out again without being seen, and drifted toward the canteen. He stopped at the bulletin board and confirmed the bad news Harley Baker had told him.

While he was scowling at the order, Sally Mahoney joined him on her way home to her father’s cabin from the post store.

“The Sarge has taken another slap at me,” Sperry pointed out. “A fine New Year’s Eve I’ll have! Was hopin’ to dance with you a couple of times. Why does the Sarge pick on me?”

“Oh, Jed! He isn’t picking on you. He goes by the black marks in the book. You and Hamlin had low ratings, so you get this duty. I—I’ll bake a cake and give you a hunk of it when you ride in.”

“That won’t be dancin’ and havin’ fun at the party,” Sperry grumbled.

“Why don’t you try to be a better soldier, Jed? Dad says you’ve got brains and that you’re quick to learn when you

want to do it. You could be a corporal soon, Jed.”

“I’d rather be post bugler.”

“Why?”

“I like the job. And a man doesn’t have to stand guard duty—”

“That’s it, Jed! That’s all you’re thinking about, an easier job!”

“What of it? I bought that old bugle, and I practice all the time when I’m out in the open. The Sarge won’t let me practice here in the post any more—says it’s confusin’. The men get my bugle calls mixed up with the post bugler’s and then they do a lot of useless runnin’ around.”

Sally giggled. She remembered the evening Jed had blown assembly and boots-and-saddles and had all the troopers tumbling out and rushing for the stables.

Sally hurried on home, and Sperry turned back toward the stables. He got inside and unearthed the canteen and took a couple of deep swigs. Then he went to his quarters to dig out some heavy clothing to use during his night patrol.

Retreat was a perfunctory ceremony that evening. After it was over, Sergeant Mahoney talked to the special guard detail. He gave orders to the inside guards and then faced Sperry and Hamlin.

“Take the north circle, Sperry—Hamlin take the south,” he instructed. “Get goin’ right after you eat. I’ll inspect you before you leave post. Report to me here.”

Sperry grumbled as he went to the mess hall. Inspect, huh? That meant no doubt that the sergeant would sniff at the contents of Sperry’s canteen. But Sperry had a way around that.

Mess call was sounded, and that made him think of his old bugle. Just to help pass the time he decided to take his old bugle along and practice during the night, out where the sergeant couldn’t squawk about it. His bugle and a canteen filled

with good whisky—he might have himself a good New Year’s Eve at that!

Sergeant Mahoney sniffed the canteen, all right, and found that it contained water. Sperry and Hamlin mounted and prepared to ride. The wind had died down, the sky was still clear, and the weather was turning colder.

“Nice New Year’s Eve,” Sperry grumbled.

“Somebody has to ride patrol,” the sergeant retorted.

“Why pick on me?”

“The record shows you’re at the top of the demerit list, Jed. You’ve been assigned to this patrol, and that settles it. I’ll save a couple of drinks for you.”

Hamlin already had ridden away, and Jed started his mount and rode slowly toward the stables, beyond which was the rear gate in the stockade.

**S**URE that the sergeant had gone into headquarters, he rode behind the stable, went inside and got the whisky-filled canteen, which he exchanged for the one filled with water. He got his bugle, too, and fastened it to the pommel of his saddle. Then he rode to the gate.

The gate guard was feeling good to the point of sarcasm.

“Goin’ for a ride, Jed?” he asked. “You outside patrol boys are in hard luck. We’ve got it fixed here so’s we can change off and on and spend a little time at the party. When you’re shiverin’ out there tonight, lad, think of us makin’ merry.”

“You go to the devil!” Jed Sperry told him; and he rode out through the gate and got his pony into a lope.

He followed the usual patrol for half an hour, riding out about three miles and then commencing the arc of a circle that he would follow to a meeting point with Hamlin.

He brooded as he rode. He was tired of

all this discipline and being ordered around. He'd get out of it somehow. The army meant nothing to him! Crooked traders and Injuns who were warlike ceased to interest him. He remembered the scene between Harley Baker and the Comanche, and failed to regret that he had not reported it. Let 'em all go hang!

The canteen was handy, and Sperry took a swig now and then. He reached the junction point and waited for Hamlin behind a clump of brush where it was not so cold. Hamlin joined him, after a few minutes, and Sperry proffered his canteen.

"Did the same thing," Hamlin admitted, grinning and offering his own. "We can have a few drinks, anyhow."

"No sense ridin' around all night," Sperry decided.

"We'd better keep to the patrol. Be just like Mahoney to slip out with a man and try to catch us neglectin' duty. He's after my scalp, the Sarg is—your scalp, too."

They separated, and Sperry began the return trip, to do half the circle and meet with Hamlin again on the far side of Fort Wallace. These patrols were supposed to observe sights and sounds that might presage anything irregular, such as skulking Indians, traders off their trails for nefarious reasons, travelers in trouble and all that.

The night wore on. Sperry began feeling tired. He rode nearer the post and forgot about meeting Hamlin again. He got near enough to hear music now and then when a puff of the light wind came in his direction.

He reached a spot he knew and dismounted. Here was a little cup in the ground fringed with thick brush, and with a jumble of rocks along two sides. Sperry rode down into it before dismounting, dropped his reins and stretched to rid himself of saddle cramp. The wind was coming up, and down here it would not hit

him.

No sense in riding around and around, he told himself. He would take it easy. He would tell Hamlin he had failed to see him and so had turned back. He would brace himself against a rock with his canteen held handy, and drink for warmth and mental stimulation.

So he did. The mental stimulation got to the point of convincing him that he was the football of the world. He began feeling sorry for himself. He thought of getting his bugle and practicing a few calls, and then thought again what was the use? He'd never get the job of post bugler when the present bugler was mustered out in a few months. Mahoney would give that job to one of his pets. Anyhow, Sperry was comfortable now. Why get up and walk the few feet to his horse and get the bugle?

The stars told him it was getting along toward midnight, was past eleven probably. At midnight, they would touch off the oil-soaked bonfire at the post and dance around it, and eat and drink and have a merry time. And he, Jed Sperry, would be out here like a blanket Indian, squatting on the ground and guzzling whisky.

He heard his horse give a slight snort, and the moonlight was bright enough for Sperry to see that the horse had put up his ears. He got up quickly and went to the horse to hold his nostrils and prevent a betraying whinny. He soothed him in soft whispers, got his carbine out of the saddle boot and stood ready.

He heard a hoof strike a rock somewhere near, then a mumble of voices. Men were riding near the little cup in which he was hidden. He heard them stop, and then could distinguish the words of a speaker who was talking Comanche.

He made out that the speaker was Chief Swift Lizard. And as he listened Sperry's hair went on end.

“Line out to right and left . . . get close to the palisade . . . be careful not to be seen . . . leave your ponies . . . when I give signal, yell and commence shooting . . . the guards at the gates will be drunk, so the man Baker sent word . . . kill and burn when we get inside . . . the man Baker will show us where plenty firewater is kept . . . take what you want . . . no prisoners . . . we will take them by surprise . . .”

Sperry understood everything. This would be a night attack on the post by this crazy youngster, Swift Lizard, and his crazy young companions who had refused to abide by reservation rules. Those at the post would be caught unawares. The troopers would drive off the Indians in time, and possibly kill most of them and chase those they did not kill.

But before that, in the moment of surprise, much damage would be done. Sperry could visualize the gate guards slain, the Indians firing into the post, shooting down men and possibly women as they ran out into the open where the bright moonlight would reveal them.

The post must be warned. It was his duty to give the warning, to save lives and property.

The outside night patrol had been established for just this.

And the Indians were between him and the post!

He heard them riding away. He got up behind the rocks to look. More than twenty of them, he judged, and they were spreading out slightly to right and left, riding slowly through the shadows, as silent as shadows themselves.

It was only a short distance to the post. When the wind gave a gust, Sperry could here the music of the cavalry musicians. They were dancing and laughing there. In a few minutes, they would emerge into the open and touch off the bonfire.

If the Indians struck just then, when

the light from the fire made everybody in the post an easy target, Sperry knew what would follow—a massacre! For it would take time for the troopers to get over the shock of surprise, get to their weapons and begin to repel the attack.

What did it matter to him? He asked himself that. He felt a little fear for Sally, but that was all. The post commander who often had rebuked him, the old sergeant who berated him, the other troopers who sneered openly at him—he cared nothing for them!

But he gulped when he thought this. Somehow, the picture was wrong. He was at a place where he had a swift decision to make.

He could keep back, not mix in at all, and when it was all over he could ride in to look at the ruins and report he had been driven away and had been forced to ride hard to escape capture and death himself.

Or, he could take a soldier's chance and try to do something about it. After all, the people in the post were his kind. He couldn't stand by idly and have them massacred without even lifting a hand to prevent it. After all, the army had clothed and fed him and drilled him and only asked that he obey regulations and submit to necessary discipline.

He made his decision—he would do what he could.

But, what could he do? The Indians were between him and the post. He was too far away to give a warning. If he fired his carbine, it might not attract attention from the gate guards—but it would attract the attention of the Indians to him, and they would come dashing back and get him, even if he did get a couple of them first. There was no percentage for him in that.

The Comanches had ridden on. Jed Sperry ran back and got into his saddle and rode up out of the little cup and took

after them, keeping into the spots of deeper shadow. He gained on them without being observed, then hung back a proper distance. The way they were riding, there was no possibility of him getting through their line and to the gate of the post to give the alarm.

The wind carried music and laughter to Sperry's ears. He knew it was within a few minutes of midnight. If he did anything valuable at all in the way of alarm, he must do it quickly.

He saw the Comanches stop and begin dismounting, turning their ponies loose. The moonlight glistened on weapons they held, weapons bought from unscrupulous traders like Baker. He could try to make a wild ride, but probably would be shot out of his saddle. That might give an alarm, but might mean his death, too.

And then nobody would know that Baker had engineered this thing. Sperry guessed it was Baker's revenge because Swift Lizard would not trade with him—the trader would have the Comanches attack and finally be driven off, leaving dead and wounded behind them.

Sperry reached for the canteen and drank deeply, choking back a cough as the fiery liquor deluged his throat. As he replaced the canteen on the pommel, his ungloved hand struck his old bugle. An idea came to him. It was a wild and whisky-induced idea, just crazy enough to work.

Sperry dismounted behind a clump of brush and ground-hitched his horse. He felt of his side arm, got his carbine and bugle, fastened the canteen to his belt, and started forward through the night, careful to make no noise, keeping as close to the ground as possible and availing himself of every bit of cover.

The Comanches were worming their way forward over the frozen ground and across the patches of snow. Sperry kept

pace with their progress. He stopped once to take another swig out of his canteen, then went on.

Voices came to him from the post on the wind. He guessed that everybody there was going out upon the parade ground to gather around the bonfire, so it must be about midnight. And he remembered something that he thought might help.

At midnight, it was the usual thing for the troopers to fire their guns into the air by way of starting the celebration, of welcoming the new year. If they did that at the right moment tonight, it might startle the Comanches, might make them think their advance had been noticed and that the troopers were ready for them. Yet they might wonder why no bullets came near them, since the troopers were reputed to be good shots.

Jed Sperry thought he could do something about that.

He heard the Comanches passing some word along their line, and judged the moment had come. Sperry flattened himself in an appropriate spot, held his carbine and put his side gun and his bugle near at hand.

A wild yell came downwind to him, and he guessed that was the signal from Chief Swift Lizard to commence the attack. Wild yells came from the throats of the other Indians, too, as they started forward and began firing at the gate.

At the same instant, gunfire started in the post, and Sperry knew midnight had come and things were working out as he had hoped.

That gunfire stopped the mad charge of the Comanches toward the gate. But the gunfire continued and no bullets sang around their ears; Sperry took a hand then. The moonlight revealed several of the Comanches, and he aimed carefully and fired. He fired a second time, scoring the second hit. He yelled wildly, like a



commanding officer:

"Foragers right and left! Fire at will!"

He seized the bugle and blew the charge. He yelled again and used his carbine, used his side gun, made a one-man battle of it. Again he blew his bugle.

Those at the post had guessed something was wrong. The gate guards were shooting and yelling. Troopers were commencing to fire from loopholes in the palisade. The Comanches leaped for cover.

Sperry blew his bugle and opened fire again, having reloaded swiftly. He yelled more orders. The Comanches arose and ran for their ponies, bent double. They mounted, hung to the sides of their mounts and began a swift retreat.

**J**ED SPERRY got in the shot he wanted. He picked out Chief Swift Lizard from his headdress; his bullet smashed the Comanche in the hip as he tried to mount.

The Comanches rode away wildly without knowing their leader had been left behind. Sperry ran forward swiftly, but carefully. Swift Lizard fired once and missed, and then Sperry was upon him.

Moonlight glinted from the knife of the wounded Comanche. Sperry dodged the blow and cracked the butt of his carbine against Swift Lizard's head. A moment later, he had rolled the Comanche over and had fastened his wrists behind his back with a thong he carried in his belt.

Harsh orders were coming from the post. Sperry knew the gate had been opened. Armed and mounted troopers were coming out with Sergeant Tim Mahoney at their head. Pursuit of the hostiles would be easy in the moonlight.

Chief Swift Lizard groaned and tried to sit up, and Jed Sperry helped him.

"So you're in trouble, Lizard," he said. "You're goin' to the post jail. Maybe you'll stretch rope, huh? You and your

wild young men—not much good in a fight."

"Even Comanche cannot fight soldiers both in front and behind at the same time."

"Shucks! Nobody behind you but me. I made all that noise and did all that shootin'. They were only shootin' into the air inside the post to celebrate New Year's. You're a fool, Lizard. The trader, Baker, fooled you. He thought you'd come here and run into trouble and he'd be square 'cause you wouldn't trade with him."

"Swift Lizard will remember that!"

"Let me give you a tip, Lizard. I'll take you into the post. You tell the captain how Baker sent you a message by that Comanche who's always hangin' around. That way, you can be square with the trader, and it'll go easier with you. Huh?"

Sperry stood up and blew his bugle and yelled to attract attention, and Sergeant Mahoney rode madly toward him with a few of the men. Speaking quickly, Sperry reported what he had done. Mahoney's eyes glistened in the moonlight.

"Knew you had soldier stuff in you, Jed," he said. "This will please Sally, I reckon. . . . One of you men catch up Sperry's mount and fetch it here! A couple of you catch up an Injun pony and put Swift Lizard on it and take him in. Another of you ride with Sperry. I'll catch up with the others."

So it happened that things worked out well, and Jed Sperry became a proper soldier, and was named post bugler when the old bugler's enlistment expired. And he got his corporal's stripes in time, after everybody was sure his reformation was sincere. And there was no further objection to his attentions to Sally Mahoney, least of all from Sally.