



The celebration included the firing of sixguns, which somehow got pointed in the wrong direction!

A popper near the end of the bar took a snap shot at him and Malloy's guns roared

Ranger's Happy New Year

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

WHERE the trail ran beside the roadbed of the new railway and was fairly level, Ranger Pat Malloy sagged comfortably in his saddle and let his pony lope toward the declining sun.

He had been riding since dawn, steadily except for a few stops to give his pony a breathing spell. Much of the trail to Copper City—nicknamed “Border Hell” by men who knew its citizenry—was so rough that a steady hand on the reins was imperative.

This, the last day of the calendar year,

was hot down in the Border country. Malloy wiped his face with his neckcloth, made a cigarette, lighted the smoke. Through narrowed eyes he viewed the rails shining in the sun and the line of telegraph poles that paralleled them.

This railway line had been built to tap the district around Copper City, where a wealth of copper ore had been discovered. For the time being the rich ore was being shipped to the nearest smelters.

Copper City, as Malloy knew, made

other Border mining camps look like kindergartens. The miners were of mixed races that seemed unable to get along with one another; many were fugitives from the Law. And the place also attracted brush-poppers—criminals who jumped from one side of the Line to the other when capture threatened.

Malloy's professional interest was the result of being sent to Copper City several times to prevent riots and destruction of property. His personal interest stemmed from his first visit, when he had met Lola Wheeler, the pretty, motherless daughter of Jim Wheeler, the railway station agent.

Malloy saw in Lola the woman he wanted to marry. Lola saw a tall, slender, bronze-faced man of thirty who had a tantalizing smile—and decided he would be all right as a husband.

They met about once a month, when Malloy's routine patrol took him to Copper City. But at times emergency duty upset his schedule. It had done so on Christmas, when he had been compelled to send Lola's present by a friend—he had been riding with a posse in pursuit of a murderer, but he had sent her word that he would surely be there to help celebrate New Year's Day.

Jim Wheeler had declared there would be no marriage with his consent while Malloy was a Ranger, not wishing his daughter to become a widow almost any moment. Malloy, therefore, had decided to resign from the service, marry Lola and settle down. Ed Catlin, manager of the copper-mining company, had arranged to put Malloy on the payroll as soon as his term of service was up.

The trail swung away from the railroad to follow the rim of a twisting arroyo. Malloy had to ride down into the arroyo and along its dusty floor for a distance before he could get out of it again.

He judged he would reach Copper City about sunset, which was not far off. He

finally topped a hill and saw the cluster of mud huts and ramshackle buildings that made up the village. As he rode on, he straightened in his saddle and became more alert.

It would be a wild New Year's Eve. The drinking establishments would keep open all night, and so would the mining company's store, operated by Tom Dell. Malloy hoped he would not be called on to exercise his authority. Everybody would be wearing a gun, which made for danger, for a drunk with a gun was a bad thing.

It was customary for men to empty their guns into the air on the stroke of midnight to welcome in the New Year. Since no clock in the town struck the hour, they depended on the watch of Pedro Lopez, who owned the principal *cantina*.

MALLOY rode along the railway line to the little depot. Jim Wheeler and Lola had living quarters attached to the station, and the door opened when Malloy was dismounting and Lola came running to meet him.

"Oh, Pat, I'm so glad you made it!" Lola said, as they walked arm in arm toward the door.

"Sorry I couldn't get here for Christmas," he told her.

"Anyhow, you're here now, and I'm so glad!" She squeezed his arm. "I've planned a nice New Year's dinner for tomorrow."

As they went into the kitchen and Malloy gulped hot coffee, he noticed that she looked worried. Jim Wheeler opened the door which connected the depot office with the living quarters, and greeted the Ranger.

"I'll put my pony in your corral," Malloy said.

"I'll step along with you," Wheeler replied. "Listen for the telegraph sounder, Lola. I'll leave the door open."

Wheeler walked with Malloy down the platform to get the pony. They led the pony

to the corral, and Malloy and Wheeler talked of ordinary things as Malloy unsaddled the buckskin and turned in.

"What you lookin' so glum about?" Malloy suddenly asked the station agent.

"I don't like trouble, and we always have it here. Bart French has been in town for several days."

Malloy's face became serious. "He been actin' up?"

"He's been doin' a lot of talkin'. He's a born troublemaker! That's why Catlin kicked him off the minin' company's land. He's been away for more'n a month. It's bein' hinted he was on the other side of the Line, and that he's thrown in with the brush-poppers and started smugglin'."

"I'll have to look into that."

"He's been makin' threats ag'in Catlin, said he aims to get square with him. Said he'd have plenty of brush-popper friends to help him."

"Any poppers in town yet?"

"They've been comin' in since yesterday noon. Their ponies line the hitch rails. Could be only the New Year's Eve spree, and it could be more."

"I'll have to take a squint around," Malloy decided.

"There's somethin' more, Pat. When Bart French was singin' his threats, somebody said he'd better behave 'cause the Ranger might be in town for New Year's. French said he'd like nothin' better than to tangle with you when his friends were here. You jailed him two years ago when they had the miners' riot."

"That makes it personal! I'll look up Bart French and have a little talk with him."

"Be careful, Pat. They may try to trap you. There's sure to be trouble tonight. There's always been bad blood 'tween the miners and the brush-poppers."

"A Ranger oughta be able to take care of himself," Malloy said. "Let's go inside and eat supper, then I'll stroll uptown."

Lola smiled at them as they entered. She dished up supper, her face rosy as she worked over the hot stove. When they had finished eating, Malloy stood up and reached for his hat.

"I'll drift around some," he said.

Lola followed him outside and clung to his arm. "Please be careful, Pat," she begged.

Malloy strode off the platform. But when he reached the end and was ready to start up the street, he stopped to take his gun out of leather and inspect it. Satisfied, he started for the end of the group of business buildings a hundred yards away.

A full moon was up, but streaks of shadow were cast by the buildings. The saloons and stores blazed with light. Men were hurrying in and out of the buildings. Raucous song came from Lopez's saloon.

Standing in a spot of darkness, Malloy inspected the scene. Light from the open doors revealed faces of passers-by. The Ranger recognized several brush-poppers against whom at present there were no outstanding warrants.

HE went into the company store. Tom Dell, the manager, was short and fat and bald, and there was very little his keen eyes missed. A few customers were in the store, and Dell was behind the counter with a clerk. Malloy's presence seemed to make some of the customers nervous, and they drifted out.

"May be trouble tonight," Dell whispered to Malloy when they could get alone. "Bart French is in town. A lot of poppers here, too. French has been makin' loud talk—says he aims to get rid of Ed Catlin, that Ed acts like the mine company owns the earth! And he also made threats against a certain Ranger—which is you!"

"Thanks, Tom," Malloy said. "What about Pedro Lopez?"

"He and the other two saloon men don't want trouble. They're on the side of the Law."

They're hopin to get through the night without everything bein' smashed."

Malloy left the store and passed through the shadows, watching and listening. He overheard two brush-poppers talking.

"Bart's got everything planned," one said. "It can be pulled off easy on New Year's Eve. Fine chance to get Ed Catlin by accident. And the Ranger got to town. We'd all like to get him, huh? New Year's Eve, with the usual stunt, is just the right time. Couldn't do it any other time 'thout runnin' a risk."

Malloy walked on, wondering at what he had heard. Ed Catlin, the mine manager, had a cottage on the hillside. He was a bachelor and lived alone. An Indian squaw cooked for him and kept the place clean.

When Malloy got to the cottage, Catlin had finished the evening meal and the squaw was cleaning up in the kitchen. Catlin greeted Malloy cordially and set out bottle and glasses.

"I've had hints there may be trouble tonight," Catlin said, after they had settled down with drinks and smokes.

"So have I." Malloy told him all he had learned. "Best thing is for you to stay home and keep out of the trouble zone. I'll drop in at midnight, and we can take a drink together—"

"Can't be done, Pat," Catlin interrupted.

"It's a company custom for me to buy drinks in the company's name for everybody in sight on New Year's Eve. I've always done it, Pat, and I can't play coward and fail to do it tonight."

"I know how you feel, Ed. But just this once—"

Catlin shook his head. "If I didn't show up, they'd think I was afraid. I'd lose prestige with the company men. They wouldn't work for me."

"But if there's danger—"

"Are you, for instance, goin' to hide?"

Pat grinned. "I reckon not. But I'm a

lawman on duty."

"And I'm on duty, in a way. I'm the copper company's man here. You want the company officials to admit they used bad judgment when they put me here?"

"Certainly not, Ed!"

"There it is! So I'm goin' to buy drinks in the company's name tonight as is usual on New Year's Eve."

MALLOY jumped up. "I've got it!" he exclaimed. "That's what they meant! They can do it New Year's Eve without runnin' much risk—"

"What are you talkin' about, Pat?"

"At midnight, they empty their guns into the air and yell, don't they? Suppose some man doesn't aim at the sky tonight but shoots straight—on purpose. They'll all be yellin'. When they quiet down, somebody will find a man who's been shot by a stray bullet, and they'll say it was an accident. Nobody'll know who fired the shot—nobody who'll tell."

Catlin's bronzed face turned ashen. He paced around the room and finally stopped in front of Malloy.

"I'll buy that round of drinks as usual Pat," he declared.

"Buckle on a gun, then. And watch where you stand when the shootin' starts. Get your back to a wall. I'll try to be near. Don't show up too early. I'll go down to the village now."

Malloy headed for the nearest of the saloons. He nodded to the proprietor and the customers, talked a little, and went outside. Most of the men in the place had been brush-poppers and Malloy had watched them closely. They seemed nervous, acted like men who knew something was going to happen.

He visited the second saloon and found the same condition. In this place were brush-poppers and miners both. And from their talk Malloy knew that, after a lot of drinking, the

two groups would be ready to jump each other.

Going between two buildings, Malloy approached Pedro Lopez's cantina from the rear, looked in through a dirt-streaked window. The place was thronged. Mining men and brush-poppers jostled one another and glared, but none was ripe yet to pass the fighting word. Malloy hitched up his gun belt and strode inside. He had spotted Bart French standing at the middle of the barroom.

French was a giant of a man, with huge biceps, and he fancied his strength. His face was whiskered. His talk and manner revealed he had been drinking heavily. A gun swung in a holster at his hip.

The Ranger started along the bar slowly, thrusting through the crowd. Men were suddenly quiet as they drew back out of his path. He went slowly toward where Bart French was standing.

The sudden quiet, the stealthy movement of men near him attracted French's attention. He glanced into the back mirror of the bar and saw the Ranger. He turned slowly, eyes ablaze, his hands on the bar, one clutching a whisky glass.

"Howdy, French!" Malloy greeted.

"Howdy, Ranger," French muttered.

"Bart, remember the riot we had two years ago?"

"I remember. You had me sent to jail for thirty days. I ain't forgettin' it!"

"I was hopin' so, Bart. You ain't the kind who can stand to be jailed. Thirty days was more'n enough for you. Think what it would mean to be in jail for a long term—maybe years."

"What's all this talk? We're here to celebrate New Year's Eve!"

"Sure, Bart—we all want to celebrate. But let's do it decent and right. Remember that after the riot the minin' company built a strong little 'dobe jail here in Copper City? Hasn't been used much, but it's always

ready. And I've got a key to it, Bart. Just behave yourself tonight!"

Bart French's eyes blazed again, and he was breathing heavily, trying to choke back his rage. Malloy eyed him, swung around him, went on through the crowd and out into the street.

IT WAS nearing midnight, the hour of possible trouble. Malloy stood in a dark spot until he saw Ed Catlin come down the path and start toward the first saloon. Malloy followed, but kept out of Catlin's sight.

Catlin entered the nearest saloon and stood at the head of the bar beckoning the proprietor.

"Everybody have a New Year's drink on the minin' company!" Catlin invited. He gestured to the man behind the bar. "Put out bottles and glasses and let me know the score."

Miners hurried forward, cheering Catlin. But the brush-poppers kept back.

"We can buy our own drinks!" some man shouted.

Catlin did not reply. Drinks were poured and he drank with the others, then went to the door. He passed within fifteen feet of Malloy, waiting outside, without noticing him.

In the second saloon, almost the same scene was enacted. Malloy met Catlin as he emerged.

"Why don't you give it up, Ed?" the Ranger asked.

"Company's orders, Pat." Catlin's face was grim, and a glint was in his eyes. "I'll go to Pedro Lopez's place now and see what happens."

"After that, Ed, why not go to the store and join Tom Dell? That might be safest."

Catlin nodded, and crossed the street to enter Lopez's place. Malloy hurried around the building and got to the rear door to watch. He saw Catlin stride to the head of the bar and beckon Lopez, who nodded at

what the mine manager told him. Lopez went back to the middle of the bar and yelled for attention.

"As usual, men, the mining company is buying a round to wash in the New Year," Catlin shouted. "Up to the bar, everybody!"

A burst of cheers answered him, and miners crowded to the bar. The brush-poppers held back when Bart French gestured far them to do so.

"We don't need minin'-company liquor!" French yelled.

Catlin didn't answer. He lifted his glass and saluted the miners, and they drank. Catlin stood there and rolled a cigarette, looked the crowd over, smiled slightly at French as though with pity, and turned to walk from the place.

Malloy got through the rear door and hurried around to the front to watch Catlin cross the street and go into the store. The Ranger hurried over there himself. Only a couple of old townsmen were in the store in addition to Dell, Catlin and two clerks.

"I don't like this, Ed," Malloy told Catlin. "Any other time, French and the brush-poppers might have jumped you over in Lopez's saloon. That they didn't shows they've got their plans made and right now French is holdin' the poppers back."

"What I'm afraid of is a ruckus 'tween the miners and the poppers," Dell put in. "It's fifteen minutes till midnight."

"Stay under cover, Ed," the Ranger said to Catlin. "Don't cross the street. If you want to watch the fun go out in front of the store, but don't mix in the crowd."

Malloy recrossed the street without being seen, stopped on the dark side of Lopez's place close to the front, and waited.

Miners and brush-poppers were reeling out into the street already, shouting at one another. Malloy saw a man glance through a window of the store and then cross back to Lopez's place. Bart French was standing just inside the door, and Malloy heard what the

spy reported to him:

"He's in the store talkin' to Tom Dell, Bart."

Malloy saw French nod. The Ranger was tense as he waited. If Bart French made a move toward Catlin, Malloy wanted to prevent a tragedy. He also felt it his duty to try to prevent a serious clash between the miners and the brush-poppers.

Men spewed suddenly out of Lopez's saloon, and Lopez himself came in the door with his watch in his hand. The few in the store emerged to stand in front of it close to the door. Streaks of light came through the door and windows to reveal them.

Malloy felt like shouting to Catlin to stand back out of the light. But that would call attention to the mine manager, and also Catlin might resent it. Malloy guessed that French had decided to make the attempt himself by way of personal revenge. And he was wondering how Catlin felt. It took courage to stand there like that.

Malloy saw Lopez lift his watch and look at it, and then lift his right hand as if to give a signal. Malloy did not see Bart French, who was still standing just inside the saloon door. Malloy got his service gun out of its holster and held it ready.

Lopez dropped his hand. "Midnight!" he yelled.

Guns began flaming and men in the street began yelling. Flashes of flame split the night and a few bullets thudded into the buildings.

Crouching at the corner of the saloon building, Malloy was trying to watch everything at once. He saw Tom Dell duck his head suddenly and guessed a wild bullet had struck the store.

Then Malloy saw Bart French reel out of the saloon. He raised his gun and howled and shot twice into the air. Malloy continued watching closely; he could do nothing until French made a wrong move.

Bart French made it. He turned slightly

and dropped the muzzle of his gun for the third shot. Even as Malloy sprang forward, French's weapon belched flame and lead. The Ranger looked across the street and saw Ed Catlin fall, saw Tom Dell making wild gestures.

French whirled around as Malloy charged with his heavy service weapon uplifted. French's shot was wild, the bullet brushing the Ranger's left sleeve. Then Malloy was slashing with his own gun instead of shooting, pistol-whipping. He sent French reeling backward, knocked his gun from his hand, sent him crashing to the ground with a final blow.

Some of the brush-poppers were charging forward. Malloy stooped and got Bart French's weapon. Malloy fired over the brush-poppers' heads and they scattered.

His own gun and French's empty, Malloy darted around the corner of the building to reload swiftly.

He heard loud cries and boots pounding as the brush-poppers came on again. He could hear them charging into Lopez's place and rushing through it as if to cut off his escape from the rear. His guns ready again, the Ranger slipped through the shadows to the front of the building.

Bart French was no longer stretched on the ground, and Malloy guessed his friends had carried him inside the saloon. Across the street, Dell and the town doctor were carrying Ed Catlin into the store. Some of the miners were hurrying in that direction, and one man was yelling that Catlin had been shot by the brush-poppers.

There always had been bad blood between the miners and poppers, Malloy knew. Many of the miners disliked Catlin, as any boss is disliked by some of his men; but they would gang together to attack any gang who attacked him. That was a matter of loyalty.

A bullet came from somewhere and brushed Malloy's hat from his head. The

firing had died down. The celebrants had exploded their first enthusiasm. Now there was danger of a war between infuriated gangs.

"Get them poppers!" somebody was shouting. "They shot Catlin! Smoke 'em out!"

MALLOY slipped to the open door of Lopez's saloon, glanced in. The brush-poppers were talking, reloading weapons. Bart French had been propped up against the wall and a man was holding a glass of whisky to his lips. French seemed to be giving orders.

Another bullet came from somewhere and burned Malloy's left arm up high. The shock whirled him halfway around. He fired at a brush-popper dodging back around the corner of the building. The miners were gathering rapidly in front of the store.

"Want help, Ranger?" one of them yelled at Malloy.

"Don't start a riot," he called back. "I'll handle this! I know who shot Catlin."

"Name him!" several men shouted.

"Stay over there. Watch over Catlin," Malloy called. "Is he alive?"

"Doc says he's bad shot, but will live." Malloy was thankful for that, and hoped the information was correct. He was blaming himself for not saving Catlin, yet he knew he had not had time to do so.

With a gun held in either hand, Malloy approached the door of the saloon again. He strode through the entrance and stepped quickly to one side.

"Out of here, or I shoot!" he yelled at the brush-poppers. "Bart French is my prisoner. Out! The miners are gettin' ready to come at you. They'll blast you off the earth 'cause French shot Catlin! Some of you were in the deal with him. You may swing for it—"

They had listened to him in silence, glancing at him, at Bart French as if for orders. French was bracing himself up

against the wall. He had recovered rapidly from the pistol-whipping Malloy had given him.

The Ranger lifted his guns and swung them before his body. "Out!" he ordered again.

A popper near the end of the bar took a snap shot at him. Malloy's guns roared. The man who had fired at him sprawled. The hat flew from the head of another popper. More of them fired as some started charging toward the door to get out.

Malloy felt a blow in his left hip and knew he had been hit. His guns blazed again and two more poppers went down, one to sprawl lifelessly, the other to crawl toward the door, where friends seized him and carried him out.

Through the swirls of gunsmoke Malloy saw men rush out into the street. Wild yells came from the miners as the brush-poppers emerged. Guns began cracking. From the sounds, Malloy could tell that the brush-poppers were rushing to their ponies.

Malloy's hip gave way and he slumped to the floor against the wall opposite Bart French. He saw that someone had left a gun with French and now he was starting to lift it, his eyes ablaze with hate as he looked at Malloy.

Their guns spoke almost at the same instant, but the Ranger's shot had been fired first. As French's bullet chipped adobe within inches of Malloy's head, French dropped his gun and toppled over.

Despite, the haste of his firing, Malloy had placed that shot: he knew French had been wounded in the right shoulder and that the shock of the striking bullet, plus the pistol-whipping he had received, had bowled him over.

BOOTS pounded and some of the miners rushed into the place with Lopez, who had departed through the rear door and

circled the building during the firing. Malloy yelled at them:

"Don't touch Bart French! I've handled him! What's happened?"

"Brush-poppers hit their saddles and rode after we'd got three of 'em," a miner answered. "Doc says Catlin will live. You bad hurt, Ranger?"

"Only a hip wound—nothin' serious. Get Doc here soon as you can to patch up French. The jail's yawnin' for him."

Most of the miners hurried outdoors again. Pedro Lopez took Malloy a glass of whisky and the Ranger gulped some. More men came in from the street, mostly townsmen, and Jim Wheeler was with them.

"I'm all right," Malloy told him. "Doc can patch me up. This'll get me leave of absence for a few days, and I can spend the time with Lola. Will you fix me a cot in the baggage room, Jim? Got to rest up a bit so's I can do justice to Lola's New Year's dinner tomorrow."

"How about French?" Wheeler asked.

"I'll deputize Lopez and a coupla others, includin' Tom Dell, and they can put him in jail and guard him till the sheriff gets here. You wire him, Jim, and give him the particulars. How about the men in the street?"

"None dead," Wheeler reported. "Some hurt. They'll be guarded till the sheriff comes."

Wheeler hurried away to wire the sheriff and tell Lola that Malloy was all right, as far as serious injury went. The town doctor appeared and, at Malloy's order, began working on Bart French first. Lopez was deputized, and two other men.

Then, propped up in a chair, the Ranger made a cigarette with some difficulty, lighted it, and waited for the doctor to get around to him. Just another incident to go on his service record.