

*They called him killer and coward  
but Rod Martin had the  
courage to face his  
accusers!*



Martin saw the posse  
in the distance

# HUNTED MAN

By JOHNSTON McCULLY

**H**IS face aflame with rage, Ed Swall stood in front of the counter in the general merchandise store at Indian Rock. His body was balanced on the balls of his feet, he bent forward slightly, his arms were arched and his hands had become fists. He looked like a man ready to hurl himself forward in a ferocious assault.

"I'm sayin' it's yore fault! I'm sayin' yuh did it!" Ed Swall raged. "Yuh told yore lies and got me fired offen the

Double Triangle outfit, after me bein' there three years. Because of you, Sam Jackson told me to roll my blankets and ride. So I'm out of a job in the dull season. There's no work on this range, and I'll have to travel."

Ed Swall was of middle age, short and heavy in body, a good man in the saddle on a ranch, but with an unpredictable temper. He was known as a troublemaker in every bunkhouse that had known his boots and blankets.

"I didn't say anything agin yuh, Ed," Rod Martin said. He was leaning nonchalantly against the counter not far from Ed Swall, his manner careless but his senses keenly alert. He was not as unprepared for trouble as he seemed to be.

ROD MARTIN was a Double Triangle rider also. He had come to Indian Rock to get the ranch mail a few hours after Ed Swall had been paid off and ordered off the ranch. Where Swall had got the idea that he had said something to get him fired, Rod Martin did not know and could not guess. It was all Ed's imagination, he told himself.

"I ain't got anything agin yuh, Ed," Rod Martin went on to say. "Why should I tell Old Man Jackson anything that'd get yuh fired?"

"If yuh didn't, why was I fired?" Swall demanded.

"Cause yuh're always makin' trouble between the bunkhouse men," Martin told him, frankly. "And here in town yuh make trouble with men of other outfits. Maybe yuh don't mean to do it, but yuh certainly do. I reckon Jackson simply got fed up."

"I don't want any trouble in my place," the aged, squint-eyed storekeeper was piping from behind the counter, ready to drop down behind it if trouble really started. "Yuh boys take yore war outside. I don't want any shootin'."

"There won't be any shootin'," Martin advised him. "This is all a mistake, and I ain't going' to draw a gun. And Ed Swall won't gun me unfair or when my back's turned."

"Maybe we'd better go out into the street and settle it," Swall suggested. "Maybe yuh'll draw yore gun if I say yuh're a coward if yuh don't."

Only a few men were in the store. Others who had been had possessed the necessary wisdom to withdraw quickly to

the street when the argument started. But the two Porter brothers, Gus and Jack, had remained. Over by the wall opposite the long counter, they were watching the scene with keen interest.

Rod Martin gave them a fleeting glance. He suspected that Gus Porter, the elder brother, had carried tales to the Old Man of the Double Triangle. The younger brother, Jack, had become enamored of a certain young widow who had been left a prosperous property by her husband. Ed Swall had been the young widow's apparent favorite. For him to lose his job and be compelled to leave the range would leave the field to Jack Porter.

Martin guessed the truth, but said nothing, gave no hint as to the guilty man. He got out the last of a sack of tobacco and a paper and began making a cigarette, fighting himself to keep cool and retain control of his temper.

"Well, yuh got anything to say?" Swall asked, taking a step forward.

"I've said it all," Martin replied. "I never mentioned yuh to the Old Man. Why he got fussed up over yuh, I don't know."

"Yuh're a liar!" Swall yelled.

Rod Martin's temper broke bounds. His own face flamed and his nostrils dilated with his quick and deep breathing. His body tensed as he stepped out from the counter and braced himself.

"Not in here, gents—no trouble here," the frightened storekeeper begged. "Out in the street!"

"Yeah, out in the street," Ed Swall said, striding around Martin and going toward the door. "Come out and let's settle it, Martin, if yuh ain't afraid."

"Don't try me too far, Swall!"

"Seems like I can't try yuh far enough." Swall passed through the door and under the wooden awning to the edge of the walk. He braced his fists against his hips and called again: "Come on, Martin!"

Let's have an end of it!"

Martin followed him out to the walk. The Porter brothers were out there already, standing off to one side and watching. The nervous storekeeper was looking at the scene through the fly-specked window. Men were watching behind the windows of the saloon up the street.

Martin was painfully aware that they could see and hear everything. It would travel from one end of the range to the other that he had backed down in front of Ed Swall. He couldn't continue to live on this range if men thought that about him.

**D**ESPITE his bad disposition, Ed Swall had many friends in town and on the range, principally because he was generous when he had his pay in his pocket, and liked to drink and play poker. He had been in several brawls and fistfights, but never before had he threatened to resort to his gun, not since he had been on the Indian Rock range anyhow.

"Swall, I'm tellin' yuh once more that I never told Old Man Jackson anything about yuh," Martin said again. "I ain't got anything agin yuh. Ain't got a reason to gunfight with yuh, and I ain't goin' to do it. Yuh better cool down now and think it over."

"Yuh're a liar, Martin! A liar and a coward!" Swall raged.

"Stop and think, Swall. We've never had any trouble, not even a bunkhouse spat—"

"I ain't got any time to argue with a cowardly skunk," Swall broke in. "I'm buyin' a drink for my friends." He got into the middle of the street and started toward the saloon. Some who hoped for free drinks trailed in that direction also.

On the walk in front of the saloon, Swall stopped and turned again. "Liar and coward!" he yelled. "Double Triangle

skunk!"

As if without conscious thought, Martin dropped his right hand to his holster. But he checked himself as he was about to jerk out the weapon he carried there. Some of the watchers saw the movement, however.

As Swall and his friends disappeared into the saloon, Rod Martin turned back into the store. The shivering storekeeper got him a sack of tobacco when Martin motioned toward a shelf.

"That was a near thing," he suggested. "Though yuh'd be blazin' away at each other. Swall is always mean, and still meaner when the liquor is in him."

"Tie up the Double Triangle. mail," Martin ordered, in a shaking voice that told of his inward subdued rage. "And put up a couple pounds of hard candy for the bunkhouse boys. Put it on my tab."

"I don't see how yuh stood it," the storekeeper declared, as he started to get the candy. "It's a wonder yuh didn't whip out yore hardware and empty slugs into him."

"Had all I could do to keep from it," Martin confessed.

"He'll ride away and tell all over that he made yuh back down. That's a bad thing to tell on a man in these parts."

"Yeah, I know. But what could I do?" Martin asked. "If I'd had a gunfight with him, folks would have said I was guilty of tellin' Sam Jackson things and gettin' him fired. I never told Old Man Jackson anything about Swall. Never even thought of tellin' him. Maybe when Swall cools down, he'll realize he made a mistake."

"He'd have to admit it in public to square yuh with folks," the storekeeper hinted. "This thing sure and certain ought to be settled before he rides away."

"Yuh can't talk sense into a man when he's hot with liquor," Rod Martin replied.

He walked to the window and looked

out on the street at knots of men talking together and glancing first at the saloon and then at the store. Sunset dyed the sky, and soon the purple dusk would come. Rod Martin's pony was waiting patiently at the hitch rail in front of the store, pawing a little as if eager to be on the home trail.

Gus and Jack Porter emerged from the saloon as Martin watched, and hurried across the street. Seeing him at the window, Gus Porter beckoned, and Martin went out upon the walk.

"Rod, this is a bad business," Gus said. "Swall will spend the night in the saloon and ride at daybreak. He'll be full of whiskey and mean, and he'll spread from one end of the range to the other that he called yuh a liar and coward and yuh didn't make a move agin him."

"What else could I do? I didn't want to gunfight him," Martin said. "And I never told Jackson anything about him. When he sobers up, he'll realize that."

"But it'll be too late then," Gus pointed out. "Every man in town heard and saw. The story will spread. I've got an idea."

"Such as what?"

"I can handle him as he is now. I'll ask him to step outside behind the blacksmith shop and meet yuh and talk it over. Me and Jack have been talkin' to him already, hintin' that yuh're innocent and he'd better look around for the guilty man."

"It may mean a gunfight and that's what I don't want," Martin replied.

"I've got it!" Jack Porter put in. "I'll take yore gun, Rod, till the talk's over. We'll show it to Swall and tell him yuh're unarmed, and he wouldn't dare draw on an unarmed man. Even his friends would turn agin him for doin' that. Once we get him behind the blacksmith shop with yuh, we can talk sense into him. It'll mean yore reputation hereabouts."

"All right! I'm willin' to try it," Martin decided. "Here's my gun, Jack."

"Yuh go around behind the smithy and wait," Gus suggested. "We'll get him out the back door of the saloon alone, and have our confab without a lot of folks listenin'."

THE Porter brothers hurried back across the street and went into the saloon. Martin strolled up the street a short distance and then crossed it, and went around behind the closed blacksmith shop to wait there in the gathering shadows.

He was wishing that Sheriff Tom Catlin had been in Indian Rock. Catlin had been a friend of the Double Triangle's owner for many years, and Martin had met him several times when the official had visited the ranch. Catlin had the wisdom of experience, and knew how to handle men. He could have convinced Ed Swall quickly enough. But the sheriff was at the county seat, many miles away.

After a short time, Martin saw the Porter brothers emerge from the rear door of the saloon with Ed Swall between them. They were talking to Swall and gesturing as they talked. They came toward him, and Martin stepped back against the blacksmith shop and waited.

"Now, let's get at the truth of this thing," Gus Porter said, when all four were together. "Ed, yuh're accusin' Rod Martin of tellin' Old Man Jackson things that made him fire yuh."

"That I am!" Swall declared.

"Ed, Martin never said a thing to Sam Jackson about yuh. Jack and I know that to be a fact."

"Maybe Martin's smooth enough to make yuh believe his lies, but I ain't believin' them."

"I said we *know* Martin didn't do it."

"How can yuh know?"

"Because," Gus Porter said, "Jack and

I know who *did* say things to the Old Man.”

“Tell me his name!” Swall raged. “Prove his guilt to me. If yuh do, I’ll apologize to Rod Martin here, and I’ll go after the other cuss and nail him. Who was it?”

The Porter brothers, Martin noticed, glanced around to be sure nobody was near enough to overhear. As a matter of truth, nobody was even close enough to see in the gathering gloom of the dusk.

“I’ll tell yuh the whole thing, Swall,” Jack Porter said, stepping toward him. “The man who got yuh fired fixed it so yuh would think Martin did it. He thought yuh’d have trouble with Martin, and he wanted yuh out of the way. If there was gunplay and Martin killed yuh, that would please him. And if yuh killed Martin, yuh’d have to ride and dodge a posse, and that’d please him, too. He’d get what he wanted either way.”

“I—I don’t understand,” Swall stammered.

“The jasper wanted yuh out of the way, Swall. Understand? He didn’t care if Martin killed yuh and had to ride, or yuh killed Martin and had to ride. The sheriff and the folks on this range are tired of killers and killin’. Every rider in town and on the range would saddle up and run the killer down.”

“But who did it—and why?” Swall persisted.

“Why? Well, Swall, yuh’re in this man’s way. See? Let’s say there’s a nice-lookin’ young widow who has a good ranch, and this man wants to marry her. And she’s been kinda sweet on you. With you out of the way, he’d have a chance.”

“Who’s the man? That’s what I want to know.”

“I’ll tell yuh,” Jack Porter said, bending forward slightly. “Then yuh’ll know Martin never went to Jackson about

yuh. The man yuh want has been watchin’ since yuh got to town. His plans didn’t work out, ‘cause yuh didn’t gunfight with Martin. Knowin’ he was innocent, Martin wouldn’t fight yuh. That wrecked this jasper’s plan. So he had to do somethin’ else quick.”

“Tell me his name!” Swall ordered.

“Sure, Swall. I’m the man,” Jack Porter said. “Yuh’re in my way, standin’ between me and the widow. So I carried tales to the Double Triangle’s owner and had yuh fired. Thought yuh’d have to ride away to get a job, and that’d give me a chance to do my courtin’ without you around.”

“Why, yuh lown down—” Ed Swall began. Rage flamed in his face, and his hand dropped to his holster.

But a gun had appeared in Jack Porter’s hand. And now it flamed and roared and spat out lethal lead. Six shots sounded as quickly as Jack Porter could work the gun. Riddled, Ed Swall swayed and crashed to earth, dead before he was prone on the ground.

**R**OD MARTIN was as a petrified man. This was the last thing he had expected, though he had believed Jack Porter had carried tales to Old Man Jackson. This cold-blooded murder—how did Jack Porter hope to escape the consequences of it? In an instant, he knew the terrible truth.

Jack Porter tossed a gun, an empty gun, at Martin’s feet. “That’s yourn,” he said. “Every shell fired. Yuh got mad at Swall finally, and killed him before me and Gus could stop yuh. Understand?”

They turned and began running toward the saloon, the door of which was spewing excited men who had heard the gunfire. Gus Porter began yelling:

“Martin’s killed Swall without givin’ him a chance to draw! Martin’s murdered

him!"

Gus began firing at Martin as he ran, and Martin sprang back into the shadows. He needed nobody to explain the plot to him. Swall's hot-headed friends would be after him in a moment.

He darted forward and got his empty gun, and sprinted around the corner of the blacksmith shop as other guns opened fire at him. It would be his word against the words of the two Porter brothers. He'd be strung up before he could defend himself.

Flight was the one thing remaining. He darted to the street and ran toward the store, where his pony was tied to the hitch rail. The storekeeper was in the doorway, trying to learn the cause of the excitement.

"I never did it!" Martin shouted at him, as he jerked at his pony's reins. "Jack Porter shot him, and is blamin' it on me."

"I believe yuh," the storekeeper called, as Martin hit his saddle, shoved his empty gun into its holster and gathered the reins preparatory to ripping with his rowels. "But nobody else will. Ride, boy—ride!"

Martin had had no time to reload, and even that would have been futile. He could not hope to win a gunfight victory over a score of men with only one six-gun. Bullets hailed around him as he bent low in his saddle and dashed down the crooked street and out of Indian Rock. Behind him, he heard wild yells as men ran to get their mounts from the hitch rails, heard somebody shouting for them to get rifles, ammunition, fill their canteens. They were forming an illegal posse, planning a blood-thirsty man hunt at the end of which they would kill rather than capture. And Sheriff Tom Catlin was far away in the countyseat. . . .

**M**ARTIN often wondered how it would feel to be a wanted and hunted man, riding to escape a determined posse ready to shoot to kill. Now, he

knew.

He had been cut off from the Double Triangle, where the boss and his bunkhouse mates might have protected him until Sheriff Tom Catlin could arrive from the countyseat. And there was a doubt whether he would be safe at the Double Triangle. His presence there might cause a battle between Double Triangle riders and the possemen.

He rode toward the western hills, where he had worked for two weeks not long ago, with men of other outfits, rounding up wild and unbranded cattle. It was a place of wild rock formations and tricky canyons with brush-covered walls and floors. At dawn of the following day, he was up in the hills, where he opened a line cabin to find the usual supplies in the grub box, a rifle, and shells.

He ate a hasty meal, filled his canteen at a nearby spring, then rode on, farther into the wild hills, losing himself in the brush. Several times he saw black dots passing across the floor of the valley below, and knew the posse had not lost the trail. He knew now what it meant to be hunted, the quarry of pursuers ready to shoot to kill. He worried about leaving tracks. He was afraid to build a fire to cook food. He flinched at every crack of a twig, at the sound of a rock rolling beneath his pony's hoofs.

A fleeting shadow was enough to make him raise his rifle. Every echo seemed to carry a menace. He could not rest, dared not sleep except for a few minutes and then every slight unusual sound would bring him wide awake.

He was being hunted as a wild beast is hunted, was fair game for any of the possemen. He could not get to the Double Triangle without running the risk of capture. He guessed that word of what had happened had been sent to Sheriff Tom Catlin, and that he would hurry to Indian

Rock, for the sheriff had been conducting a vigorous campaign against illegal posses, against men who took the law into their own hands.

He dared not surrender; they would not listen to his story of innocence and Jack Porter's guilt. He could only run and dodge, flinch at every sound, fearful of every puff of dust raised by the hoofs of his pony.

Riding into the hills the second day, he circled and started to double back. The uncertainty of his position was tormenting him now. He wanted to know the position of the posse, to learn whether they had given up the chase.

On the third morning, he saw the running dots in the distance, and there seemed to be more of them. He had decided against trying to get to the Double Triangle. And if he rode away from the district and made his escape, he would leave behind the suggestion of guilt, would ride under the taint of cold-blooded murder, ride on and on with some sheriff liable to pick him up when he least expected it.

He had been compelled to make a run for it, he told himself. They would not have listened to his story in Indian Rock, and even if they had listened they would not have believed.

He wondered whether the sheriff had reached the town. If he could get to old Sheriff Tom Catlin and surrender, the sheriff would protect him, take him to the countyseat jail, and see that he had a fair deal. But even that looked black. It would be his story against the stories of the Porter brothers.

Ed Swall had taunted him, had called him liar and coward. Men would believe that behind the blacksmith shop he had reached the limit of endurance and had emptied his gun into Swall's body. The Porter brothers undoubtedly had exhibited

their own fully loaded and clean guns to show they had not done the shooting.

**B**EFORE noon that third day, Rod Martin reached a decision—he would try to get back to Indian Rock while the posse was out in the hills, try to get to the sheriff and surrender.

Martin knew the back trails, and traveled over them as swiftly as he could. He saw no signs of pursuit. The possemen were combing the hills behind him, cautiously, perhaps expecting him to open fire at sight.

Along a road which ran across level country, he spurred his pony and made good time. Sunset came and passed, and the purple dusk shrouded the land. And finally he saw the twinkling lights of Indian Rock in the distance.

The moon came up before he reached the little town. His pony was almost exhausted, and Martin rode slowly, stopping frequently to watch and listen. He circled the town and approached it finally along the countyseat trail, leaving the trail and going into the deep shadows whenever he heard a rider or vehicle approaching.

He stopped his pony behind the blacksmith shop, let him drink from the trough and then ground-hitched him. He made sure his gun was fully loaded, that the cartridge loops on the right side of his belt were filled. As he managed to get across the street in a dark spot, he reeled from weariness.

Martin had decided to get to the back of the store, see who was inside, listen to talk. Townsman and range men always congregated either in the store or saloon. He went cautiously through the shadows to the rear door, beside which was a small window. Peering through the window, he had a good view of the interior.

The old storekeeper was lounging behind his counter, his spectacles shoved

up high on his forehead. About a dozen men were sitting around on boxes and barrels, talking. A range rider Martin knew, who evidently had been with the posse and had left it to return to town, was talking.

"The old coot who runs the Double Triangle says he knows Rod Martin didn't do it—says he ain't that kind of man. Fed the posse but was mighty gruff about it. He sent word for the sheriff to come."

"Find Martin's trail?" the storekeeper asked.

"The boys are followin' it—or were when a few of us quit and came back to town. Jack Porter's pony went lame, and he and Gus decided to ride back here with us and wait to see what happened."

Martin drew in his breath sharply. So the Porter brothers were in town!

"Sheriff should be comin' into town almost any time now," the storekeeper declared. "He'll take charge. Tom Catlin don't like manhunts and lynchin' parties or killin' fugitives."

Watching at the rear window, Martin saw the Porter brothers suddenly enter the store through the front door.

"Put yore coffeepot on the stove," Gus Porter ordered the storekeeper. "Cut us some cheese and open a can of sardines and one of peaches. Take the lid offen the cracker barrel. Me and Jack are starvin'."

"Anything new?" the storekeeper asked.

"They'll catch that Martin skunk, all right. The boys are closin' in on him. Maybe they've got him already. They agreed to shoot him on sight. Quicker than stringin' him up. Won't have to listen to his lies, either."

Martin opened the unlocked back door an inch at a time, fearful of creaking hinges, and slipped inside and closed the door again. A high tier of boxes prevented those in the front part of the store seeing

him.

GUN ready, Martin peered around the end of the tier of boxes. The Porter brothers were eating already, continuing their talk with their mouths stuffed with food. They were sitting on boxes with their backs toward the rear of the store.

One of the old timers began relating a story of a manhunt in the district years before. Moving slowly and carefully, Martin advanced toward the group, finally getting behind a rack of barrels containing molasses and kerosene.

He waited until Jack Porter's hand was in the cracker barrel and Gus was busy digging sardines out of a can with his knife, then stepped out where light from the hanging kerosene lamp would reveal him.

"Everybody, hands high! Quick!" he yelled.

They started, turned, saw him standing there crouching and with gun held ready. Martin fired one shot over the heads of the Porter brothers.

"You Porters! Make a move, and I'll let yuh have a slug each!" Martin warned. "Yuh other gents stand still. Put me on the end of a manhunt, will yuh, Porters? Now yuh're goin' to tell the truth."

Gus Porter made a quick move, a swift dodge to one side as he half fell to the floor and went for his gun. Martin's weapon barked again, and Gus Porter sprawled up against the counter with a bullet through his right arm.

"Stand still, Jack!" Martin ordered. "Yuh murderer!"

"Who's a murderer, if it ain't you?" Jack Porter answered. But he kept his hands up.

"Yuh Porters listen, and then say I've told the truth. Yuh got my gun away from me by a trick. Then Jack emptied it into Ed Swall, 'cause Swall was between him

and a certain widow Jack wants to marry. And you, Gus, helped him in the plot. Then yuh yelled that I'd killed Swall, and I had to make a ride for it. Ain't that the truth?"

"Why—why whoever heard a yarn like that?" Jack Porter stammered.

Bending almost double, Martin moved toward them. His face was haggard from fatigue and loss of sleep. He looked like a man irresponsible and dangerous from nervous strain.

"Tell the truth!" he barked. "Do some talkin', Gus!"

"I ain't got anything to say," Gus muttered, holding his shattered arm. "Somebody—get help."

"Don't a man move, 'less yuh want a slug in yore body," Marlin warned. "Yuh tried to make a fugitive of me, and I'm claimin' a little revenge for that. Yuh shot Ed Swall, didn't yuh, Jack?"

Gus started to mumble something, and Jack Porter thought he saw his chance. He lurched aside and drew gun from holster and fired quickly—too quickly for accurate aim. The bullet sent Martin's hat flying off his head.

Martin's gun flamed and cracked, and' he did not miss. Two slugs tore into Jack Porter's body, and he dropped his gun and collapsed to the floor. Gus made a movement as if to retrieve the gun he had dropped, using his left hand. Another shot from Martin's weapon splintered the floor within inches of Gus' hand, and he ceased his effort and fell back against the counter again.

"Tell the truth, Gus!" Martin ordered. "This is yore last chance."

"Jack shot him," Gus muttered. "He got yore gun from yuh by a trick, and shot Swall—"

"All yuh gents hear that?" Martin asked. "If yuh did, remember it."

On the point of collapse himself from

weariness, Martin reeled against the counter. Somebody came hurrying in from the street, and he started to rise his gun again.

"Hold it!" a harsh voice barked at him.

SHERIFF TOM CATLIN was there, and a grim deputy from the countyseat was right behind him.

"Seems like we got here just in time to hear somethin' interestin'," the sheriff said. "The man who came for me told me the yarn. Looks like yuh cleared up everything yoreself, Martin."

The sheriff strode forward and turned Jack Porter over while the deputy took charge of Gus. Jack Porter was still alive.

"Howdy—sheriff," he muttered. "Reckon yuh're too late. I won't live—long enough—stretch rope. Reckon neither Swall or me—will git the widow now."

"So Martin told the truth?" the sheriff asked him.

"Yeah. Thought the trick would work—but it didn't. Thought we'd shoot Martin durin' the manhunt—and that'd end it. "

He started to say something more, but could not. His head rolled to one side and his eyes became fixed and glazed.

"Get the town sawbones to fix Gus up," the sheriff ordered. "Reckon he'll be able to travel to jail. Martin, yuh must have had a tough time, facin' a thing like that. Better get a stiff drink and somethin' hot to eat, then hit for the Double Triangle. I'll send a man ahead to tell yore boss the truth. Glad yuh doubled back to town and settled this thing yoreself. Saved me a lot of work and trouble."

"Most of the posse is still out, Sheriff," the storekeeper. told him.

"Urn! Be dangerous for Martin to ride to the ranch tonight, then. Might run into some of 'em and get shot outen his saddle. I want riders to start out and find the

possemen and spread word that everything's settled and Martin is innocent. Tell yuh what I'll do, Martin—I'll have my deputy take Gus to the countyseat to jail, come daylight, and I'll ride to the Double Triangle with yuh myself. Ain't visited there for a coupla months, and I'm yearnin' for a hunk of Double Triangle apple pie."