

RANGER'S RUSE

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When a Texas Ranger Has Three Suspects For a Killing, It Takes a Bit of Applied Psychology to Pick Out the Right One!

THE hot, brassy sun shone mercilessly upon the lifeless body of a man sprawled face-down at the edge of the trail. Spurring around a bend between ragged rock outcroppings, Dan Hubbard stiffened in the saddle and a deep furrow appeared in the suntanned forehead above his wide-spaced blue eyes. He was a big man, with wide shoulders and powerful arms.

This was Hubbard's second day in Mimosa and suddenly he knew that his brief vacation from the Texas Rangers was going to be short-lived. Cold, sure instinct told him that he was looking at murder.



DAN HUBBARD

He had a mild, good-natured face and there was gentleness and restraint in his manner. Only his eyes mirrored his aroused feelings.

Riding up to the man whose body lay about thirty yards away from his idly grazing horse, Hubbard dismounted. He saw the ugly bullet hole between the man's shoulder blades, saw that the six-gun in the worn holster of a man he recognized

had never been drawn.

Lyle Richman, he thought grimly, would never foreclose on another ranch. Hubbard had known Richman just as he knew most of the cowmen and business people in Mimosa. For he had punched cows in the area for three years before being sworn in as a Texas Ranger. Also, he had been a blacksmith's helper, before turning to cowpunching—which accounted for his powerful physique.

Although Hubbard's face now remained placid, as though he were unmoved, his eyes missed nothing in their keen search of the ground around the corpse. But if there were any clues he could not find them.

He caught up Richman's horse, loaded the ambushed victim on the animal and lashed him in the saddle with pigging string. Then he wheeled about in the trail and headed back for Mimosa.

Richman had had few friends in Mimosa, and most of the cowmen and storekeepers regarded him as a loan shark. He was shrewd, drove a hard bargain and never gave any concessions. No one had ever suspected him of shady dealings, yet that had seemed merely to increase Mimosa's dislike of him.

He was an outsider with Eastern connections and plenty of money. Drought, blackleg and occasional losses from rustling had placed most of Mimosa's cowmen in his debt. For that reason, almost anyone in the town could have been guilty of the drygulching.

BUT Hubbard was inclined to favor one of three men. One was Dode Simpson, a bull-headed cowman with a hot temper, who had thrown Richman off his spread when the money lender had persisted in courting Simpson's daughter. When Richman had offered to cancel his note on Simpson's ranch if the girl would marry him, Simpson had threatened to kill him.

Then there was Luke Morley, owner of

Morley's Mercantile, who was about to lose his store to Richman and had been drinking himself into a state of desperation.

Finally, there was Jim Klinger, a two-bit cowman who, besides being in debt to Richman, had taken a physical beating from Richman after accusing him of rustling some prime Herefords from his ranch.

Dan Hubbard was still considering these men in his mind when he entered Mimosa's dusty main street. A crowd formed quickly and followed him to the undertaking parlor. Among the men were the merchant and the two cowmen—they had just ridden into town—whom Hubbard suspected.

"It's Lyle Richman!" somebody yelled.

"Yeah, and he's dead," said Hubbard softly, "with a bullet in his back."

"That's better than he deserves," growled Dode Simpson, running hard-knuckled hands through his iron-gray, close-cropped hair. "I don't feel sorry for him."

"Maybe yuh'd better feel sorry for yoreself then," said Hubbard.

"What do yuh mean by that?" demanded Simpson, his broad face flushing.

"Did you put that bullet in Richman's back?"

"No!" came Simpson's hot retort. "But I wish I had."

Hubbard's features remained expressionless, and his manner was smooth and gentle.

"Maybe you did," he murmured, and his glance slid around the crowd to fasten on Luke Morley and Jim Klinger.

Neither Morley nor Klinger could hide the hint of satisfaction in their faces as they heard Hubbard's words to Dode Simpson.

"That's a load off yore mind, Morley, isn't it?" said Hubbard. "With Richman dead yuh can hold onto yore store."

Morley, a wiry, gaunt-faced man with a reedy voice, snapped back:

"Just because yuh're a Ranger that don't give yuh call to accusin' everybody in town of Richman's murder!"

"Morley's right," broke in Klinger, and rage was plain in his own ruddy, thin face. "Richman wasn't liked in this town any too well."

"I know that," Hubbard quietly admitted. "But it's still murder—and Richman was shot in the back. Don't any of yuh forget that Richman wasn't crooked, either. He had plenty of cash and he had

little mercy—but he was a man of his word. As long as I'm a Texas Ranger I aim to find his murderer—no matter who that man is."

Hubbard directed two of the onlookers to carry Richman's body inside the undertaking establishment, then told the crowd to break up.

"Yuh got any clues as to who did it?" someone asked him.

"Yeah," Hubbard answered, and he saw how interest quickened in the faces of Simpson, Morley and Klinger. "I picked up a few things out in Bullet Notch where I found the body. After I question my leadin' suspects mebbe I'll be able to produce the killer." He looked at Simpson. "Dode, come in and see me in an hour."

"I suppose I'm one of yore chief suspects?" sneered Simpson.

"Shore. You, Morley and Klinger."

Hubbard deliberately turned his back on the crowd and walked off to the vacant town marshal's office which he used whenever business brought him to Mimosa. Inside he closed the door and sat at the desk, turning over in his mind a desperate trick he had conceived for unveiling the killer.

ACTUALLY, he had no clues. But that didn't bother Hubbard.

He waited until the streets had cleared, then strolled outside. But as he walked through the ankle-deep dust of the Texas cattle town, his eyes were not on the weathered, false-fronted buildings. They were on the horses standing hip-shot at the hitch-racks.

He was looking for three horses in particular—those of Simpson, Morley and Klinger. For though Morley was a town man, he usually kept a saddled horse ready at some hitch-rack. Simpson rode a big Morgan roan. Morley had a chestnut gelding and Klinger a fast, dappled gray. When Hubbard failed to see either of the three animals he turned down an alley and entered the town's big livery stable through the rear entrance.

He spent five minutes in earnest conversation with the owner, after he had ascertained that the horses he sought were inside. Then he led the mounts through the back exit into some brush and out to the edge of town where Saul Riker maintained a blacksmith shop.

As usual, Riker had closed up early but the doors were not locked and a fire was still burning in the forge.

One hour later Hubbard returned the way he had come and led the horses back to the livery stable.

"Anybody lookin' for these hosses while I was gone?" he asked.

"No," assured the scrawny little man who ran the place.

"Good. Now I want yuh to clear out for an hour or two. Get yore supper or somethin'. But don't show up for awhile. And remember, don't talk."

The man looked puzzled, but shrugged and ambled off. . . .

Going back to the marshal's office Hubbard sat down, took a pad of paper and wrote in bold letters:

CLUES ON RICHMAN'S KILLING

He made one notation, then looked up as Dode Simpson entered and slammed his bulk down in a chair close to the desk.

"Well, get it over with," growled Simpson. "What yuh want?"

"I figger Richman was dead about five hours when I found him," said Hubbard. "I want to know where you were five hours before I run across him."

Simpson thought a moment before answering.

"I was out circlin' my north herd and checkin' my line fence," he finally said.

"Alone?"

"Yeah."

"That means I have only yore word as proof. Not so good."

Hubbard snorted, gave Simpson a smile which he knew would anger the man, then got up, strolled to the window. He looked out a moment. Turning quickly, he caught Simpson just leaning back in his chair after having sneaked a glance at the pad on Hubbard's desk.

The Ranger's eyes glowed with aroused interest. He asked several more questions, then dismissed the cowman with the warning to stay in town.

After Simpson had gone, Hubbard went out and brought in Morley and Klinger for questioning. He followed the same procedure he had used with Simpson, even that bit about rising to stroll to the window.

Later, he called in several more men, talking with them idly. He did this more for effect than anything else, convinced in his own mind that either Simpson, Morley or Klinger had done the killing since they had the strongest motives. But

now he had to wait for the killer to take his bait—that is, if the killer did not suspect it was bait.

Darkness had fallen upon the land when Dan Hubbard stepped out into the street and made the rounds of the saloons and restaurants, announcing that he wanted all the horses in town brought to the marshal's office.

"What kind of fool idea is this?" demanded Jim Klinger, belligerently, stalking out of a saloon.

"I forgot to mention before," said Hubbard, and his eyes singled out Klinger, Simpson and Morley, "that I found hoof-prints around Richman's body. From what I could see, the killer, after downin' Richman, rode up to make shore of his job. Well, the killer's hoss had a split right rear shoe. I figger on lookin' at all the hosses and—"

"Heck, more than one cayuse mebbe has a split right rear shoe," grunted Morley.

"Shore," agreed Hubbard with a slow but challenging smile. "I'll take my chances. Get yore hosses, gents!"

HE WAITED patiently while chap-clad punchers and cowmen got their horses from hitch-racks and the livery barn.

"I'll take yore critters first," Hubbard said, gesturing to Simpson, Morley and Klinger.

The rest of the crowd kept their mounts back, but the three suspected men pressed forward eagerly while Hubbard bent to examine the right rear hoof of Simpson's big Morgan.

"The shoe is split!" someone yelled.

"Simpson is the killer!" another man shouted.

The cowman whirled about angrily. His gun leaped into his fist.

"It's a blasted trick! I didn't kill Richman. Somebody—"

"Shut up, Simpson, and put down yore hogleg," warned Hubbard, his eyes hard. "Stand back, all of yuh. We ain't through yet."

Calmly Hubbard examined the horses of Morley and Klinger. Oddly enough, Morley's chestnut gelding also had a split right rear shoe. Only Klinger's gray had perfect shoes.

Klinger pounded a big fist into his palm.

"Either Simpson or Morley killed Richman!" he shouted, and broke off to glare at Hubbard. "Well, Ranger, make your choice! That clue about the split shoes was good, but not good enough. Which man yuh figger done the job? Simpson or Morley?"

Dan Hubbard smiled, but there was no humor in

it.

“Why, neither of them, Klinger,” Hubbard replied softly. “You’re the jasper I want.”

Murmurs of surprise and disbelief rolled through the crowd.

“Are yuh crazy?” gasped Klinger. “Yuh just said—”

“My trick worked,” murmured Hubbard. “The fact that yore hoss has perfect shoes makes yuh the killer.”

“How?” sneered Klinger.

“Why, before callin’ all of yuh out here I led yore hoss as well as Morley’s and Simpson’s out to Riker’s blacksmith shop. I used to be a blacksmith’s helper, don’t forget. All three hosses had perfect shoes, but I put split shoes on the right rear hoof of each animal.

“Then I left that pad on my desk so’s each of you three men would see the clue I jotted down about the murderer’s hoss havin’ that bad shoe. I figgered all three of yuh would be curious enough

to see what I had written and that the guilty man would lose no time in changin’ shoes. And it would be easy to make the change with Riker away from his shop and the shop at the end of town where few people pass.

“I also figgered that the two men who were innocent wouldn’t even bother to look at their hoss’ hoofs. I was right. Simpson and Morley are prob’bly plumb surprised to see them split shoes and I’ll shore pay ‘em to have Riker fix ‘em up in the mornin’.”

A warning shout reached Hubbard as Jim Klinger, lips bared in a snarl, lunged away from his horse and pulled out his gun.

Hubbard seemed to move slowly. But that was only an illusion. Klinger did shoot first, but he was wild. Close upon that shot—so close that the explosions blended into one another—came the report of Hubbard’s Colt. Klinger dropped his gun, clamped his left hand to a bloody shoulder while the crowd rushed in to capture him.