

The WANTED MAN by Harris Dickson

B REATHLESSLY you gallop into the Mysterious Horseman into the spirited action of this new Blue Ribbon serial "The Wanted Man," by Harris Dickson, and breathlessly thereafter you follow every development in this novel of intrigue, adventure, and mystery. Picture to yourself a long standing feud between southern families; the woodland rendezvous of two fascinating women with a handsome equestrian; a political upheaval in far off Salamanca, Central America—and you have some idea of the picturesque background of Mr. Dickson's story.

Despite its thrills, or, rather, right along with them, Mr. Dickson has written the new serial in a light and amusing vein that is as full of chuckles as it is of sensations. It "sells" itself with a romp. You'll enjoy it, from Uncle Nat's opening encounters to the gripping climax, and you'll agree that the author has earned a place among the Blue Ribbon novelists.

Besides being an author, Mr. Dickson is a lawyer and a war correspondent. Fifty-four years old, he has more than a dozen books to his credit and in addition numerous short stories and special articles. Two of his novels are "The Black Wolf's Brood" and "The Duke of Devil-May-Care." His home is in Vicksburg, Miss.

FIRST INSTALLMENT.

The Man Hunt.

There was nothing scary in the behavior of that particular automobile; yet it sneaked up behind Uncle Nathaniel Stark with such abruptness as to give him the hunch of something unpleasant that was just about to happen. Before that car came whirling so rapidly around the curve at Walker's store Uncle Nat had seemed to be the sole proprietor of a vast and vacant world. Not even a rabbit stirred in the dusty road, nor did the raucous voice of a jaybird mock him from the treetops through which he glimpsed here and there a patch of empty sky.

Everybody and everything seemed to be asleep, or gone somewhere else, which suited the old Negro, who craved solitude and peace for that after dinner meditation. He had not slept, not a wink; he had sworn to that on a stack of Bibles. He only lay flat on his back beside the road, contemplating the foliage above him, in that hazy and delicious state of mind that opens the portals to slumberland.

Then a car shot around the curve. Up went Nat's tumbled head, which might have been mistaken for a bunch of grass moss. Like a suspicious mud turtle making ready to tumble off his log, Uncle Nat craned his neck and squinted at the threat which interrupted his doze.

No considerable person would have intruded. Uncle Nat, as attending to his own affairs, drowsing beneath an oak which flanked the left post of Major Stark's plantation gate. At that time of the afternoon it might appear that an automobile journeying openly along the public road should not have constituted a sinister circumstance. Plenty of autos rounded Walker's Bend, fetching white folks from as far south as Vicksburg. And from the northern direction three young Memphis men traveled regularly, but separately, to visit Miss Barbara Stark.

Uncle Nat wasn't afraid of automobiles, whether they honked or whether they didn't honk. This car never opened its mouth, but rushed on, noiseless and swift, like a dog that doesn't bark and means to bite. Altogether Nat felt a disagreeable hunch that those fellows in the car were contriving to meddle with some of his business.

Uncle Nat believed in hunches, and they came true. For instance, not twenty minutes previously, from one single glance at Major Stark's woods, he had experienced a labor saving hunch that by snatching himself from the proximity of her kitchen Aunt Calline would soon be yelling, "Nat! Nat!" and that when Nat showed up missing Aunt Calline would conscript Seymour, the chauffeur, to hunt for wood for supper. Events figured out precisely that way.

While Nat was reposing languorously by the roadside he grinned as he listened to Aunt Calline's fretful voice, duly followed by the strokes of Seymour's ax. Presently the ax had hushed and tollsome clamors no longer vexed the calm of Bennington. The wood having been cut by proxy, Nat rolled over for his second nap, but got instead his second hunch that additional trouble was being thrust upon him in the shape of an automobile. And yet on this placid summer day, when southern winds blew softly and green young cotton promised an abundant harvest, there seemed no external reason for Nat's apprehension concerning the occupants of the oncoming vehicle. Neither was there an internal reason for dissent.

He had just succeeded in surrounding a most competent dinner, filling every chink and crevice of Nat's body politic to the exclusion of indigestible grudges. No grudge could flourish upon the hearty soil of Bennington. Major Stark's wide open doorways extended their welcome only to the gracious things of life, shutting out all malice, and closing in silence upon their ancient animosity—the Claytons across the lake.

When the auto first butted in upon his serenity Uncle Nat blinked both eyes and watched with growing suspicion as the thing rolled nearer. Instinctively he mistrusted the fat man at the wheel, and felt an even greater hostility for the little fox jawed weasel who sat beside him. Both the strangers were white, but Nat sized them up as not being his kind of folks. It never pays for Negroes to mix up with the wrong sort of white folks, so Nat would frown to be asleep and let the car pass by. It did not pass. It stopped. The fat faced man leaped out and looked straight at him with a far too jovial salutation:

"The top of the morning to you."
Some white folks can act free and easy with Negroes, and some don't know how. By intuition old Nat always parted the sheep from the goats, and never cracked his face as he answered these goats with appropriate reserve.

"Good evenin', suh."
"Could I trouble you to step here a moment?" Mr. Fattface smiled.
"Me? Suttinly, suh; suttinly."
No matter how genially Mr. Fattface might endeavor to conduct himself, Uncle Nat knew

that such men never made a living by tarrying along the big road and skimming with Negroes for fun. These men were seeking to get something out of him, so Uncle Nat shut his mouth just the minute they opened theirs. Mr. Fattface laughed so much that a blind man could see plumb through him. Evidently he took a Negro for a fool, and handed out his jollies to put Nat in a good humor to make him talk. The other wiry little weasel with the toothbrush mustache and fox jaw did most of the listening; nevertheless, old Nat correctly picked him for the boss.

Under normal conditions there could be no hitch in starting Nat's conversation mill. His sparker never failed to respond. The biggest majority of reasons why Nat strolled down every day to his beneath this oak was because he loved to gossip with folks who passed along the road. Gay young planters always stopped to inquire about Miss Barbara Stark, to send flowers and notes and such. By which philandering traffic Uncle Nat managed to acquire something more than news.

He knew that this pair of tightwad strangers would never produce a dime or a dollar. True, they wore stylish clothes and drove a fine car, which was no earmark of quality, as swarms of poor white trash now went gallivanting around in automobiles. Furthermore, Mr. Fattface talked too nice to suit old Nat, entirely too nice. The Negro suspected them both. So when Fattface leaned out to say:

"I beg your pardon, but would you mind stepping here a moment?" he clinched Nat's hunch that they were fixing to meddle with somebody's business.

An Uncle Nat began to rise every one of his seventy odd years seemed to hit him simultaneously. He limped up from the ground like an aged patient crippled with rheumatism—a disease which always timed its attacks at a moment when crafty old Nat was preparing to assume the defensive. After adjusting one dangling gaiter across his shoulder he shuffled toward their car with a queer sort of dog-legged gait, and a pair of loose trousers flapping about his shanks. His transparent eyes met their gaze with childlike amiability, and his smile stood broadly open as the major's front gate. The strangers congratulated themselves. Here was a simple minded person and they would pump him dry.

"I beg your pardon," began Mr. Fattface; "but can you tell me whose residence this is?"

"Suttinly, suh, suttinly. Dis is Bennington Plantation, whar Major Kenneth Stark lives at. Dat's his name on de mail box."

It did not escape Uncle Nat that both the strangers had read this name, painted in black letters on a white box. Then why were they asking him? Nat pointed at the mail box and stood pat. Mr. Fattface bobbed his head one time, same as a minnow nibbling at a cork.

"Ah? Major Stark?" Mr. Fattface pretended that he was just catching on. "Then that water must be Lake Marmion? And if I remember correctly, that big white house on the far side, that should be the Marmion plantation?"

It was unnecessary for Uncle Nat to turn and look in the direction the strangers indicated. Beyond the level cotton fields and through a rift in the willows which fringed the water Nat well knew that they could see the white column of Marmion house on the western banks of the lake. Why should he say anything? These doct Marmion house, to show for itself. The Negro fumbled his hat brim with both hands, and respectfully inclined his head, the very embodiment of attention, while permitting them to gaze at Marmion house until they got tired.

"So that's where the Claytons live?" said Fattface.

"Egactly, suh; egactly."
"Do you know the family?"

"Me? Know de Claytons? Suttinly, suh, suttinly."

Know the Claytons? Who could possibly know them better? The memory of Uncle Nathaniel Stark loved to dwell upon a golden era when the two families had been intimate. But now, after the political fight, the lawsuit, and the duel, no Clayton of Marmion could ever be mentioned in the presence of grim old Major Stark. Which was a further reason for Nat to shut up stupidly when Mr. Fattface began shooting so many questions at him.

"Hadn't Mr. Stuart Clayton been absent for years to Central America?" Hadn't he been seen the last few days on the plantation?" "Was there any bypath along which they could approach Marmion house without using the public road?" It appeared that Mr. Fattface went sloshing around the country with a hide stuffed full of questions.

Like an artful dodger, old Nat ducked every-which-way before their futile fire. Except for the warning hunch he might have reeled off a rignarole about how Major Stark and General Clayton first got cross-ways in politics, then fell out over their boundary line; then traveled back and forth to the courthouse for years, then fought a duel on the lake bank, where Major Stark got his stiff leg.

If Nat hadn't felt suspicious of these strangers he would have turned himself loose to brag his proudest brags about the boyhood of Mr. Stuart Clayton. For hadn't it been old Nat who taught the youngster how to ride and shoot? Hadn't the little fellow delighted to run away from Marmion and come to Bennington, eager to play with Uncle Nat? Didn't Nat remember his wonderment when little Stuart first discovered Miss Barbara, a wee, red, squirming baby in her cradle; and how curiously he had prodded among the swaddling clothes to investigate what manner of creature it might be.

Nat loved to think about those happy days before the lawsuit and the duel came up, before General Clayton took his son and went away. Neither of the Claytons had ever returned, but since last Thursday the Marmion tenants were saying that young Mr. Stuart was at home. These were things which old Nat might have told, and plenty more, but didn't.

"Do you think," Fattface persisted, "that Mr. Clayton is over there now?"

"Mebbe so, suh, mebbe so." Old Nat cocked his bushy head to one side, and ponderously considered. "Mebbe so. Ef he ain't at home, suh, den mebbe he's some place else. Blegged to be one or t'other, 'cordin' to de way I figgers it."

Both strangers listened impatiently to the Negro's rambling answers, until Mr. Fattface got provoked and himself took charge of the grilling.

"How long have you lived here?" he questioned curiously.

"Since I was born, suh."
"What is your age?"
"Wess Gawd, suh, I ain't got no age."
"Got no age?"

Blue Ribbon Fiction



STUART CLAYTON.

"No, suh. 'Fonderstan' boss, befo dat on-civilized Yankee war old Miss went down de age of all her niggers in a book, an' tuk dat book wid her to Saint Louey, den she lost it. Dat's how come none o dese Bennington niggers ain't got no age."

Mr. Fattface glared at Mr. Fattface, and Mr. Fattface snickered back at Mr. Fattface; what's the use trying to get sense out of such an idiot?

Then Mr. Fattface got redder, and came to the bat again with another question, "But you're an old man?"

"Suttinly, suh, suttinly. Nigh seventy, an' 'right to'ble ole fer my age!"

"And you live in this vicinity?"

"Live in dis vicinity? No, suh, no suh, not me. I stays in dat whitewashed cabin jes behind de major's big house. See it yonder?"

"I mean do you live in this neighborhood?"

"Egactly, suh; egactly."
Mr. Fattface had the kind of mouth that shuts up tight, like a bear trap. He did the snapping, while Mr. Fattface did the smiling. Old Nat's countenance went even blanner as Mr. Fattface leaned clear out of the car and demanded:

"Do all the colored people down south know as little as you know?"

"Some of 'em does; an' 'Ben agin some of 'em doesn't—jes 'cordin to deir larning."

From the way that Mr. Fattface spoke these words, "colored people" and "down south," old Nat felt sure that he came from some place up north and resented a foreigner's imputation of his ignorance. It was necessary for him to demonstrate the intelligence of his race and section.

"You are 79 years old?" Mr. Fattface continued, with a sneer which riled the Negro. "You have lived in this neighborhood for seventy years and can give no in-

formation about Stuart Clayton. I don't believe you know him."

"Me?" The old man bristled up. "Huh! I knows dat boy same as I knows my own chillun. Me an' his pa used to be good friends, special good friends."

"So? You're an intimate acquaintance of the family?"

"Egactly, suh; egactly." Old Nat straightened up with a pride in his aristocratic connections.

Mr. Fattface negligently twirled a watch chain as if the matter cut no ice with him and inquired: "But now you might not recognize this young man if you saw him?"

"Me? Huh! I kin shurt bofe eyes an' pick dat cut out of a pasture full."

Then the two white men put their heads close together over a paper, which Mr. Fattface produced from his pocket, and read:

"Stuart Clayton, age about thirty-one?" Old Nat nodded his bushy head.

"Black eyes and hair? Swarthy complexion? Slight mustache and goatee? A shade over six feet? Weight about one hundred and sixty?"

At each item the negro kept nodding, but more doubtfully towards the end, when he replied: "Mebbe so, suh; mebbe Mister Stuart is done growed up dat much. But when I first knowed him he wasn't knee high to a hopper grass."

So intent were they that neither the strangers nor Uncle Nat suspected another pair of eyes spying upon them. A hundred feet northward, just where the road curved, Mr. Florian Razilly, the young creole guest of Major Stark, was crouching behind a clump of sassafras bushes, watching and listening. Plainly he did not belong to these woods, being fastidiously dressed in light tan, a pink silk shirt, and necktie of many colors. Although beyond hearing of what passed, it was evident that Mr. Razilly not only knew but felt deep concern in this

interview between the white men and Uncle Nat. When he saw that they were about done, he kept himself concealed and hurried north, along the edge of the road, then stopped to wait for the car.

"Well," asserted Mr. Fattface, folding the paper from which he had just been reading. "That's the official description of Clayton. He usually wears khaki riding breeches, light gray coat, and a broad brimmed panama hat."

"Shucks, Mister!" Old Nat broke out laughing as he slapped his thigh. "Now you's pranking' wid me. I sho would love to see Mister Stuart in dem clo'es. Dat boy used to scamper 'rout'n dis place in his shirt tail. Lorde, how chillun does grow up."

If he had so desired old Nat could have added a far more convincing detail to their description—a jagged scar on the inside of young Clayton's right forearm, three inches above the wrist. For Nat well remembered the morning on a camp hunt when that pestiferous little Arthur Morris boy had shot Mister Stuart with a rifle which had no business being loaded. Of course, Nat remembered, but the excessive curiosity of these two strangers warned him that he was already talking too much with his mouth. So he shut up again, as Mr. Fattface chuckled:

"You haven't known Clayton quite so long as you have, but we are old pals and thought we'd drop in to see how he's getting on."

"Egactly, suh; egactly." The negro turned and pointed: "Jes' hit dat big road an' foiler it roun' de lake. Tain't more'n five miles to Marmion."

"But we must be sure to catch him at home," Mr. Fattface cried, all his blandishments. "Couldn't you slip over there and find out for us?"

A gleam of confirmed distrust brightened in Nat's eye. Every negro was familiar with the constables' trick of sending a stool pigeon on ahead to spot their quarry before they showed themselves. Warily on guard, Uncle Nat wore an even more guileless smile of innocence as he gazed up and replied:

"Suttinly, suh, suttinly. I could manage to hobble over dere. But Lorde, mister, wid dis rheumatism o mine, yo' car kin make it to Marmion an' back agin whilst I'm studyin' 'bout fixin' to git ready to start."

"See this?" Fattface flashed a five dollar bill. "Have you seen Stuart Clayton within the last two or three days?"

Uncle Nat liked the looks of that five dollar bill, but didn't like the looks of the face behind it.

"Is it seen Mister Stuart Clayton? You mean seed him my own self? Lemme study, suh; lemme ponder." Nat scratched his head and deliberated, then spoke very slowly:

"Some niggers contend dat he done 'rived back home; an' den agin some niggers 'epute dat he ain't. Nobody can't place no 'pendence in what a nigger says."

"Very well," ordered Mr. Fattface. "Go and see who's right. Here's five dollars in advance. We'll pay you ten more when you return with our tip."

That word "tip" sounded powerful like a constable, although the five dollar bill crinkled mightily pleasant in Nat's hand. He slit it eye and over with loving care, while Mr. Fattface told him what to do.

"Meet us at dark under that big tree. See it?" Mr. Fattface pointed to the spreading magnolia which overhung a corner of Major Stark's alfalfa patch. "And get twenty dollars more." Mr. Fattface doubled his bribe, and old Nat placed one foot on the running board and began to take notice.

For a dense appearing negro, old Nat pretty nifty got the hang of what they wanted. By adding "tip" and "pal" and "catch" to his previous hunch, he figured that these strangers were not distributing five dollar bills for the sport of playing a friendly joke on Mr. Stuart Clayton. This notion shimmered in Nat's mind while he listened to their additional instructions—he must hurry at once to Marmion—return to the magnolia tree with the tip—if Stuart Clayton were at home, then Nat would guide the strangers to the back door of Marmion and surprise its master.

"Above all," insisted Mr. Fattface, "keep a still tongue."

"Egactly, suh. Don't let on to nobody Den I git twenty dollars mo'?"

"Yes, Twenty."
Having once broken the ice, old Nat promised plentifully, and the car began to roll.

At dark, under the magnolia, Mr. Fattface emphasized the final injunction, and turned on his gas. Then, as the car passed by him, old Nat batted both eyes at something he saw on the rear seat. For the laprobe had fallen, and there lay a pair of shiny handkerchiefs.

As their automobile disappeared around the curve, old Nat stood gazing after the inquisitive strangers, and mumbling to himself:

"Huh! Got nippers, same as constables. An' dem white men who does itch to git holt o' Mister Stuart."

It being a matter for deep consideration the negro sat down again to ponder, and to wait for the postman who constituted his excuse for hanging around the gate. Back and back his thoughts ran persistently to the little boy who had grown up and gone away, and was now returned to Marmion. Despite the litigation and the family feud, Nat's memory had remained loyal throughout the silent years at Bennington. Nobody and nothing could shake his faith in that buoyant child who used to love him. Then why were these men with the nippers so eager to drop their "saw" on the rear seat? For the laprobe had fallen, and there lay a pair of shiny handkerchiefs.

As one born to the trade of woodcraft, old Nat drew away from the road and stole noiselessly beside it through the underbrush, without rustling a leaf or cracking a twig. Beyond the first turn the car was standing still, and Nat gave a start to see Mr. Florian Razilly whispering with the strangers.

"Huh!" he grunted. "Pears like Mr. Razilly's 'em what to do."

Nor was the negro very far wrong; negroes rarely make mistakes in sensing the attitude of white men. Mr. Razilly and his beautiful young wife had come up from New Orleans to visit the Starks on the very day after Stuart Clayton had reappeared at Marmion. Nobody thought of connecting the two events. So far as Nat knew Mr. Razilly had no business in Bennington except to go fishing and to lie all day long in a hammock. But—the negro remembered it now—he had twice seen Mr. Razilly talking with tenants from Marmion plantation.

"I got to 'skivver' 'bout dis," he said, and began creeping nearer the automobile, when he heard the postman whistle, while Major Stark's voice called from the front gallery: "Here, Nat! You Nat! Get the papers."

The postman's approach had also warned Mr. Fattface to move ahead with his car, as

Mr. Razilly stepped backward and sauntered to the house.

When the postman came jogging along in a jumper, his old gray mare kicking up the dust, he found Nat as usual at the gate to meet him.

"Hello, Uncle Nat," he called out cheerily; "how's everybody?"

"Fine, Mr. Edwards, fine."

"Here's the Major's papers, and the letter that Mrs. Razilly looking for. So long. See you on my way back. Gittup! And his flea bit mare went jogging on."

This pleasant colloquy occurred twice each trip, once immediately after dinner on the up, and again just before supper, when Mr. Edwards returned south. Neither of them could linger for the carrier had his route to cover, and the Major kept shouting from his gallery, "Hurry, Nat! Where the devil are you going with my papers?" The only way to get along such Major Stark was to hustle when he hollered, and Nat's queer little legs—like a bowlegged duck—began waddling towards home.

It was two hundred yards from the main road to Bennington house. A broad driveway curved among the pecan trees and rounded up easily at the step leading to the rambling residence. If Uncle Nat had actually been sensitive to the trouble hunch he must have recognized the signs. From afar off he could see them sitting side by side upon the top step, with bright eyes eager for their letters, pretty brown Barbara Stark and her house guest, the even browed Major Razilly. Two such women, working together, were bound to brew trouble.

Mrs. Razilly's mixture of French and Spanish blood—she was a true creole—had given her an oriental underglow which smoldered beneath the rich dark olive so alluring in creole girls. But it was wind and glare, out of door activities which tanned the cheeks of Barbara. For where Barbara's sleeves were rolled up, and where her shirt-waist opened at the throat, there showed the fairer skin, smooth and white as an egg shell.

She perched upon the top step, like a trim and alert thrush, with two bare arms, compact to take care of herself, and a little slim body which tingled with all the dancing devils of delight. Adelaide was demure and different—and delicious.

Even had old Nat been Keeper of the Grand Zombi—the sacred voodoo serpent—it would have strained his prophetic clairvoyance to connect this pair of trouble makers on Major Stark's front steps with a certain pair of nippers which he had seen on the back seat of Mr. Fattface's automobile. But Nat wasn't studying about nippers as he waddled toward the house with his mail. He was wondering how Mr. Florian Razilly had got back from the road so quickly, for he saw the creole now pacing the major's gallery.

"Huh! Mr. Razilly sho did hustle back in a hurry."

The new and old régimes in southern life were typified by three men on the gallery—Major Kenneth Stark himself, stout and short and round, with a Barrack's mustache; and the taller, thinner Doctor Humphreys, with a grizzled beard like Robert E. Lee. Both wore their coats in deference to ladies. Not even their age, nor the relaxation of home, could lessen this long ingrained punctilio. They sat conversing quietly, the major holding his stiff leg straight out before him, while one hand rested upon the knob of a heavy cane. Every detail of their simple personalities harmonized with magnolias and myrtles, with generous galleries, with the stark white pillars and open hallways of Bennington house. They belonged precisely where they were, and Mr. Florian Razilly did not. These two were old time planters, and easy going; Razilly was up-to-date, a city man, young and restless.

Razilly had flung aside his coat. In his shirt sleeves, a sickle of ultra stripe and pinkish hue—wearing white flannel trousers and pipe clay shoes, Mr. Florian Razilly smoked his cigarette and paced the gallery. At every turn or so he paused and listened to what the girls were saying, for Razilly imagined that they chattered more freely when he was out of hearing. At these turns and pauses Adelaide glanced up to catch her husband's mood, as she lived in dread of his fluctuating temperament. But that was not the only reason why she kept glancing up, for Razilly had guessed right—the two girls did have something hid between them. Presently the keen faced and sharp eyed Razilly stepped within the hallway, where he began to joint up his fishing rod.

After Florian had removed his chilling surveillance the chatter on the steps broke out, lowering into confidential whispers, then rising happily in the effervescence of their common girlhood. No less pretty, Adelaide, the wife, seemed even younger and far more of a child than Barbara; for the lovely creole was married from a convent when one short year ago had marked the frontiers of her world. Now she was nibbling at the edges of life, and tasting, and savoring.

As old Nat came in sight he added an extra dose to his shuffle for the benefit of the ladies. Both girls sprang up and raced along the gravel walk toward him, clamoring: "Anything for us, Uncle Nat? Got a letter for me?"

"Dunno, Miss Adelaide," Nat made a bluff at reading the addresses. "Mebbe dis'n't fer you. I can't make out sech ben scratchy writin' widout my specks."

The girls had wailed old Nat some fifty feet from the house, when Major Stark got up and hobbled to the steps, impatient for his Vicksburg Herald; yet he refrained from calling the negro until Nat should give all attention to the ladies. Then a pink shirt and striped flannels flashed past him, down the steps, and Razilly took charge of the mail.

"Mine didn't come," he spoke fretfully. "This is for you, Adelaide, from your mother. Here, Nat, take the rest."

Had Razilly been a different sort of man Barbara might have supposed that he was meddling just to tease them. But there seemed a peevish spirit behind it, and perhaps Barbara did him an injustice. She felt her face growing hot and her muscles tightening in resentment against a man who assumed to censor his wife's correspondence. While she was aching to slap his face she only turned aside with a shrug to signify how she'd handle a spying husband.

Slight as was her gesture, Razilly saw and put his shrewd interpretation on it—that the girls were concealing something from him. One woman is difficult to watch; but the team work of two becomes inviolable. He wondered why they took such long rides to gether. Why were they forever whispering apart? And why their sudden silence when he drew near? In a woman's life there could be but a single object, and Razilly suspected a man at the bottom of this.