

The WANTED MAN by Harris Dickson

THE STORY THUS FAR.

ON opposite sides of Lake Marmion, in Mississippi, are two huge estates—Bennington, owned by Maj. Kenneth Stark, and Marmion, owned by Gen. Bob Clayton. Their owners have been at feud for many years. First there was a political row, then a bitter lawsuit on a boundary, then the feud between Maj. Stark with a stiff leg, while Gen. Clayton fled to Salamanca, in Latin America, with his tiny son Stuart. As the story opens, old Uncle Nat, Maj. Stark's colored servant, is dosing by the roadside when two constables ride up in an automobile. They have heard that Stuart Clayton has returned to Marmion, and they question Uncle Nat, who is evasive. They also question Florian, Razilly, crooks, who, with his beautiful wife, Adelaide, who is the guest of Maj. Stark and his lovely daughter Barbara. The constables have handcuffs with them, and are on a man hunt for Stuart. They leave after arranging a rendezvous with Uncle Nat and later Stark. Uncle Nat tells his story at Bennington House and it causes Adelaide and Barbara to become strangely excited. There are hints of a mysterious fryst in the woods surrounding the lake.

SECOND INSTALLMENT.

The Horse in the Jungle.

MEANTIME old Nat kept fumbling and digging through his pockets, but he found nothing more. "Mr. Razilly," he inquired, "have you got that blue colored letter what comes ev'ry day?"

"No," Razilly answered briefly, "they come from New York in the later mail."

"Den I'll give dese to de major," Nat said, and hurried to the steps.

Having delivered the major's paper and otherwise discharged his fatiguing duties, Uncle Nat now exercised his privilege of sitting on the steps with the rest of the family, and moved close to the pillar beside which Dr. Humphreys sat. The doctor, an old time comrade of Gen. Clayton, would be interested in a cargo of news which Nat heaped to unload.

For a long time he sat and looked and held his tongue. The restless Mr. Razilly kept striding along the gallery, halting now and again to overhear the girls at their low voiced chatter, while Major Stark burrowed in his chair and barrowed himself behind a newspaper. Everybody appeared to be studying about something else, when old Nat tapped the doctor's knee and whispered his tidings:

"Doctor, two strango constables is hangin' roun' de plantation."

"Constables?" Doctor Humphreys saw the negro's agitation, and leaned forward to hear.

"Eggsackly, suh," Nat answered breathlessly. "Dey must be mighty high constables, from de biggity way dey conduct demselves."

"What do they want?"

"De's seekin' fer somebody, an' powful sot on gettin' him."

"Whom do you think they are after?" the doctor inquired.



Blue Ribbon Action

date of the Supreme court. Then he thumped the floor, and finished:

"So I got Barbara's land by law—every inch of it to the burnt cypress. After I beat him, Clayton bundled up his hat and left the country."

"Where did he go?" The insatiable Adelaide kept asking questions in spite of Barbara's nudges.

"Went to a place called Salamanca in Central America."

"And raised a lot of trouble," Florian Razilly spoke before he thought, then shrugged his shoulders when everybody looked at him. "That is—I've heard he did—in a general way."

For one moment Adelaide glanced questioning at her husband with a puckering of her brows as if she were trying to remember something; but Florian scowled so fiercely that she turned again to Major Stark.

"O, major," Adelaide exclaimed, clasping her plump little hands and gazing upward into his face. "So this young man who has just come back, he's the son of the general with whom you fought the duel? How romantic!"

"Romantic?" Barbara laughed outright at the romantic language that her father would use should he catch his daughter on the lake bank, meeting this ardent young exile from the tropics.

"It sounds like a fairy tale," Adelaide insisted.

"Huh!" Major Stark snorted, and rose on his gameleg to hobble away from all such fairy tales. "Florian, get ready. It's time to go for base. Hurry, Nat, tell Neezer to run out the motor boat. We'll have him tow us down to the mouth of Lone Oak Slough."

"Lone Oak?" Barbara repeated with a startling gesture, and checking herself before anybody noticed it except Razilly. During Florian's grilling of the major, and trying the feud out of him, this dutiful daughter had never uttered a word, but sat staring across the lawn and choking a propensity to laugh while her parent swelled up like a frog. She enjoyed that part of the performance, but when her father intimated that he would fish near the mouth of Lone Oak Slough the girl changed countenance and tried to appear quite nonchalant as she inquired:

"You are going to Lone Oak?"

"Yes, daughter."

"But I thought you were trying the upper end of the lake this afternoon."

"No. Neezer thinks that silver bass will be feeding along the lower bar."

"O! The bar." That made all the difference in the world, and Barbara settled back with a sigh of satisfaction, for she knew that from the lower bar her father and Adelaide's husband could not see a certain log in a certain little glade which they were trying to place.

"Come on, Adelaide," she said and sprang up gayly.

Again Florian Razilly detected the byplay between the two conspiring women, as Adelaide followed Barbara and they strolled away together.

As the whispering girls snattered away to lose themselves amongst the shrubbery, Florian Razilly eyed his wife with vague suspicion, while Major Kenneth Stark wriggled deeper in his chair and got weather every safety valve and kept pounding the floor while Doctor Humphreys continued:

"I was present and heard what Clayton

said. He argued that you had reached an incorrect conclusion on free silver—

"—that I hadn't the gumption to understand a financial proposition!"

Nobody else would have dared laugh at Kenneth Stark as old Matt Humphreys laughed.

"Honest, Ken? Honest? Right here in the bosom of the family, won't you admit that our ideas are just a trifle hay on international finance?"

"Maybe so." The major emphasized his statement by another whack. "But I was right."

"No matter who was right," his friend insisted in a tone which expressed a lifetime of regret, "political differences never justify a quarrel between two lads who were reared like brothers. That first set you crossways, so gallant Bob Clayton died in exile because he couldn't bear to look across this lake at a constant reminder that he had shot his old comrade of the First Mississippi. And he did not want to rear his son in an atmosphere of revenge."

Three the major winced and tried to mutter something, but only held himself more rigid, with every line of his figure denying what Doctor Humphreys said.

"That's true, Ken, and you know it. Bob Clayton deserted Marmion so that his son would not grow up with the nightmare of having enemies. Bob wanted little Stuart to feel that the whole world was his friend."

"Matt, where'd you get all that Sunday school stuff?" Major Stark blurted out.

"Tom Yandell told me," the doctor answered.

"Tom Yandell?" At mention of this once familiar name Major Stark glanced up.

"Tom told you that?"

"Yes. He has already established himself in Salamanca when Bob joined him, and they became associated in various enterprises. Three years ago Tom visited New Orleans. I went down to see him and he told me how Bob Clayton used to sit staring at the sea and wishing to be back at Marmion. And Bob always spoke of you as if no difference

had ever come between."

While the gray bearded mediator talked on and on he scanned the other's face. Beneath the lightning of Stark's lips, beneath the stubborn gleam of his eye, Humphreys read his wavering thought, even though the major said:

"That's all rot. Rot!"

"But you can't refuse to believe what Tom Yandell says?"

"Of course not, but Tom was too infernally sentimental."

Then Humphreys leaned forward and touched the hand of his friend. "Ken," he pleaded, "Don't cling to this grudge. Don't. Hate is worse than death to a man like you. It hurts his very soul."

"Rot!" the major retorted.

"And there was a time when you would have given your right arm to make up with Bob. Don't you remember? I was here on the night before Bob left. You had your horse saddled to ride to Marmion. But you lacked the moral courage. Instead of telling him how you felt, you walked up and down your room—all night long. No, don't shake your head. I heard you. Next morning Bob was gone."

"Not a word of truth in it! Not a word!" The gruff old major got up to leave, but Doctor Humphreys caught his arm and begged:

"Let me go to Marmion and invite the boy here. Then we can find out what his trouble is."

"Don't want to find out!" The major jerked away, stalked across the gallery, and wheeled at the threshold. "Matt Humphreys, I invite none but friends to this house. And I'll just as soon be friendly with a Republican. Get ready now, I'm going fishing."

Doctor Humphreys continued to smile as he heard the major's cane go thumping through his hallway. For the first time in years they had discussed the Claytons, and he was making progress in being tolerated.

Safely hid from all spying husbands, the excited young couple could scarcely wait until she and her accomplice had seated themselves behind a screening gardenia. Then she whispered eagerly:

"He's the man that we've been meeting. I just know it."

"Of course he is," Barbara agreed with most astounding composure. "But aren't you dreadfully worried about those officers?"

Adelaide shuddered at the very thought.

"Constables!" A word expressed Barbara's contempt. "They are probably look-

ing for some Negro on his plantation. I'd better be thinking about the forty varieties of Cain that father would raise if he suspected me of flirting with a Clayton."

"What a romance?"

"Romance? Well, start a riot in the Stark family. We must be careful. This afternoon the men will be fishing so near our log."

"O! O!" her creole face lost a shade of its color as Adelaide suggested, "We'd better not go."

"Go? Certainly we shall go. But if your husband and my father go there, too, we may have an adventure."

Adventure? Ugh! Adelaide shivered at her fascinating peril, and cuddled closer to Barbara. With all French intuition and curiosity, she envied the more fortunate girl, and sighed, "O dear, it's wonderful for a woman to have her romance."

"Why Adelaide?" Barbara clasped an arm around her friend. "You have your romance; you married your lover."

"Not so," Adelaide promptly denied both statements.

It was paradoxical how circumspect this convent girl could be in certain matters, and how astonishingly frank in others. Facts of nature to which Barbara would never allude in the presence of a man, the creole discussed with startling candor; and then Adelaide would be virtuously shocked at the American girl riding in her car, alone with a boy whom she had known all of her life. The two were bred in different atmospheres, and Adelaide now emphasized their differences by making no concealing of a situation which Barbara would have buried in her own heart.

For some time Adelaide remained silent and thinking before she spoke again with French directness. "O, maybe one affair. Maybe after a while Florian he come. Florian he get provoked and kill my lover, perhaps. But that is too sad, too sad." Her bubbling vivacity refused to dwell upon such a sadness. Changing her tone, she caught Barbara's hand and asked: "My dear, what does your lover call you? He does not know your name. You must have a nom d'amour."

"Sure! I have a bully nom d'amour," Barbara answered complacently. "My nom d'amour is 'Adelaide.'"

"What? My name?"

"Yes, the first name I could recall—in a hurry. Now, don't fly off the handle like that. It just popped out accidentally. Yesterday we were sitting together on the log, and it seemed too comical to hear him say 'Miss.' 'Miss,' when all of a sudden he shot the question: 'You must have a beautiful name. What is it?' He took me by surprise. I couldn't think of any name except yours and the house girls. 'Mandy' isn't poetic, so I told him 'Adelaide.'"

With all dramatic effect the creole sat down beside Barbara and whispered:

"Florian had a secret motive to visit here."

"A motive?" Barbara wondered. People generally visited Bennington because they liked it.

"Yes, Adelaide spoke jerkily. "He tell me nothing, I guess. Many times you invite us, Florian always say no. He could not leave his bank. Last Sunday the Salamanca consul dined at our house. They have much business together. I hear him speak with Florian the name of Clayton, Clayton. After consul he go, Florian say to me, 'Miss Barbara Stark lives near General Clayton's old home?' I reply to him 'Yes.' Then Florian give me his orders. 'Telegraph Miss Stark we come to visit her at once.' So we arrive, and Florian never imagine I know he slurs to deprecate her ignorance. 'But it concerns Mr. Clayton.'"

"Well," Barbara decided, "if Mr. Clayton knows anything about it I'll make him tell me."

"But you will never tell, Florian, never, never, never."

"Heavens, no! Florian and I—no no confidential. Come along now. There go the men. We must ride, quickly."

Together they raced up the front steps; through the wide open hallway they saw their three fishermen go flailing out of the back gate to the wharf at which Neezer's motor boat lay moored.

"Now, they've come!" Barbara's face flushed with anticipation. "Hurry, Adelaide, hurry! We must ride much farther today, and approach from the low end. If we travel along our same old road your husband may see us."

Unlike the two young ladies, old Nat Stark never tarried to change into riding togs; neither did he consume time by powdering his nose, as Adelaide had done with fastidious care; nor in sprinkling his handkerchief with a suggestion of new mown hay, as Barbara always did. It was her distinctive perfume. Uncle Nat paid no such tribute to his personal pulchritude. He tarried for nothing, but slunk immediately out of sight until Neezer's motor boat had towed the white folks beyond all possibility of their shouting back a job for him to tackle.

Nobody could paddle a dugout with the skill and speed of this dexterous old Negro, who shoved off from Bennington wharf and steered northward, keeping well out of Neezer's return course in the motor boat. For Nat didn't want to risk being given a wood chopping contract. By the time Adelaide and Barbara had mounted their horses they could see Nat's solitary figure winging his flight across the lake, once in a while lifting his fishing pole and displaying it conspicuously upright, as an advertisement of angling intentions.

Green young willows, like a semi-submerged forest, grew far into the water on the western banks, and wary perch fed in hiding places beneath. Into this concealment old Nat plunged the prow of his canoe, then furled his fishing pole and began paddling swiftly among the treetops. With strong sure strokes he urged his dugout through the greenery toward a point on shore from which an ancient path led to the rear of Marmion House. There he stepped out and secreted his canoe.

"Not ten feet away, in the densest, darkest brake, he heard what sounded like the trample of a bear. Being hemmed in so tight, Nat couldn't run. Then something snorted. "Huh! dat boss is rusted scardan what I was. Wonder how come he done strayed down here? Tain't no hosses belongs here!" Curiosity led him through the brake to where he found the horse, a blazed face, stocky foot sore, frequently ridden by Mr. Bart Scurry, the manager of Marmion. It would have been mysterious enough to discover the sorrel in such a jungle at all, but it made Nat study a heap when he found that the animal was saddled and bridled ready to ride. However, the sorrel stood hitched, and had probably remained hitched for several days; anybody could tell that by a glance at the

tramped ground, where his restlessness had made a narrow clearing for himself beside his box of feed.

"Dis sho is puckerful!" the bewildered Negro mumbled. "Dey hitched dat hoss here an' dey feede dat hoss here. How come?"

"I'm nacherly 'bleeged to find out about dis," he determined, and turned to follow a roundabout path toward the rear of Marmion House.

For a while the old Negro hung back in the brush, blinking and smiling at his memories. He saw a fat, black cook sitting just outside her door, keeping the flies in circulation with a palmetto fan and smiling at her naked children, who wallowed in the dust like partridges. Lazy hounds lounged in the shade, ignorant of an alien presence, and even the wily ginseng raised no alarm. Queer doings might be afoot among the white folks, but no hint of unrest showed up in Marmion's back yard. And yet, despite the mellowing influence of a vanished day, old Nat could not dislodge the nippers and the saddled horse from a man's mind.

No sound came from the great house; no face looked out from any window. By noiseless maneuvers, without shaking a bush, old Nat gained a position from which he could reconnoiter the front gallery, where he saw Mr. Bart Scurry, the big faced manager, leaning silently against a column. This should not have aroused suspicion, for Mr. Bart was a chronic leaver when he wasn't busy doing something else. But a manner in which he leaned made old Nat look sharper, and get a hunch that Mr. Bart was intently watching the road.

At the instant when Nat showed himself Mr. Scurry detected him and hurried down the steps, advancing in the manner of a sentinel. When he recognized the innocent invader the tense lines softened in Scurry's face and he halted Nat long enough for any person within the house to hear. It impressed old Nat that Mr. Bart was talking for the ears of other folks inside.

"Hello!" Scurry called out. "It's Uncle Nat Stark. Where you come from? How's everything at Bennington?"

"Fine, Mr. Bart, fine. Us got a nice stand o' cotton, but a little slower wouldn't hurt."

"Well," inquired the manager, "what brings you over here?"

It sounded strange, the tone of Mr. Bart in speaking those words. During the general's day nobody on Marmion had ever questioned why Uncle Nat came or how long he meant to stay. They just hollered for him to light and hitch and come in, it was mighty nigh dinner time. But from the short words of Mr. Scurry Uncle Nat felt compelled to state his business.

"Mister Bart," he explained, "yo' niggers keeps a sayin' dat Mister Stuart's done come home. So I jes' 'lowed to ramble over an' set a while wid him."

"Sure, sure, Mr. Clayton's in the house," Scurry still kept his voice unraised. "Wait here, Nat, and I'll tell him who you are."

"O, Stuart," Scurry shouted from the door, "it's Uncle Nat, old Nat Stark."

"Who?" a man's voice called out from the front room.

"You remember Uncle Nat Stark? From Bennington? Used to go fishing with him when you were a boy?"

"Yes, O, yes," the voice agreed. Then Nat could hear a whispering behind the shutters, before the voice spoke again.

"Tell Uncle Nat to wait," it said. "I'll come out."

The loyal old duck legged Negro had padded across Lake Marmion and fought his way through thickets in the serene faith of a welcome whatever else might be happening. The Claytons were always proud to see their friends, and Uncle Nat likewise had a notion that he could serve his friend by putting him wise to Mr. Foxjlaw. No five dollar bill in cash, nor twenty in prospect, could induce old Nat to keep his mouth shut, whilst foreign constables were contriving to grab Mr. Stuart Clayton.

Bart Scurry didn't let Nat out of his sight, and he didn't sit down. He stood up, eyeing the door and talking loud as if to drown a whispering that came from behind the shutters. Old Nat sat listening for the whisper, yet pretending to laugh as Mr. Scurry retold many pranks of Stuart Clayton's boyhood. And Mr. Scurry hollered so loud as to convince Uncle Nat that he was really shouting for the benefit of somebody else.

Over his right shoulder he plainly saw Mr. Razilly, fishing near the south end of the lake, alone in his boat, and occupying the one position which commanded a view of the Marmion wharf. Whatever else might be happening, Razilly had kept grazing across the water through his spy glasses, why he talked with Marmion tenants, and why he had stopped the constable's auto.

Nat kept stolidly mighty hard until his attention was attracted by a tread in the hallway, and he saw a man, the man whom Mr. Foxjlaw had led him to expect. It was a tall, swarthy man, with tiny black mustache and goatee, wearing the khaki breeches, light gray coat, and top brimmed hat of the constable's description.

"O, Stuart," said Mr. Scurry as the young man halted uncertainly at the threshold. "Stuart, here your old friend, Uncle Nat Stark from Bennington."

"Uncle Nat," Scurry corrected.

"Sure, I mean Uncle Nat. So this is Uncle Nat?" Now he turned to look at the Negro.

"Suttin'g, Mister Stuart, suttin'g. Dis is me. I never is forgot you." The Negro stood up expectantly and tried to smile. It seemed mighty strange for Mr. Stuart not to shake hands, but just to sit in a rocking chair and ask:

"Well, old man, what did you want with me?"

The tone was utterly devoid of sympathy or comprehension. It took the starch out of Uncle Nat, who eased himself down again on the top step and leaned against a column. Nobody spoke a word. Mister Scurry kept one eye on the road, while the other eye watched Nat with visible anxiety. Both white men seemed waiting for whatever the black man might do, and this sensation gave Nat the fidgets. Once, when he turned his head, he felt sure that another pair of eyes were spying upon him from inside the parlor window, peering out through the blinds.

"Howdy Mr. Stuart, howdy," said Uncle Nat. But the young white man never offered to shake hands.

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"Ken," inquired Dr. Humphreys, when the restless Razilly had gone inside. "Ken, have you heard anything about why young Clayton came home?"

"Not a word. None of my dambusiness." At the flash old Nat dodged out of range and stood listening for thunder. But it was less of a clap than Doctor Humphreys expected—no ladies being present—so he dared call down another.

"I'm going to get hold of that boy, and see if he's in trouble," he said quietly.

"Certainly, he is," snapped the major. "Those Claytons were born for trouble."

"Ken," his tormentor began. "Ken, don't you think these old animosities should be forgotten?"

"Forgotten? How can I forget? Look at my leg."

"Yes, I know. But in every quarrel there's always a little right on both sides."

"Not a bit. Clayton was wrong, dead wrong. The courts said so."

"But that courtesy could have been adjusted if you hadn't got so bullheaded."

"Me? Bullheaded?"

"Yes. And you might have accepted Clayton's assurance that he meant no personal offense by his speech at Issaquena court-house."

"Didn't he speak plain enough for any fool to understand?" Stark used his cane as a safety valve and kept pounding the floor while Doctor Humphreys continued:

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