

The WANTED MAN by Harris Dickson

THE STORY—THIS FAR

ON opposite sides of Lake Marmon, in Mississippi, are two large estates. Bennington, owned by Maj. Kenneth Stark, and Marmon, property of Gen. Hob Clayton. Following a bitter feud, Gen. Clayton fled to Salamanca, Central America, with his son Stuart. Stuart returns on a mysterious mission after many years and as the story opens federal detectives are hunting him. Uncle Nat, Maj. Stark's aged servant, goes to Marmon to warn Stuart, but is greeted so coldly he suspects the young man. Barbara, Maj. Stark's beautiful daughter, and her guest Adelaide, wife of Florian Rastley, a jealous crook, keep a tryst at the Lone Oak with a mysterious horseman in local legend. Barbara, who has told him she is Adelaide, tells a falsehood—she is married. The girls flee as Rastley approaches. Uncle Nat bobs up again and this time recognizes Stuart, who gives him a note for "Adelaide" and arranges a rendezvous in an old graveyard near Bennington. Uncle Nat vainly tries to deliver the note to Florian with some other letters. The madly jealous husband confronts the innocent Adelaide, who finally tells him to "ask Barbara." Barbara appeals him.

SIXTH INSTALLMENT.

"That Note Is Mine!"

WHILE Nat was limbering up for another heat he saw Rastley glance again at the hedge, then rush to the steps and snatch his rifle. Whereupon old Nat rose like a quail and resumed his departure.

Instead of chasing the runaway Nat, Mr. Florian Rastley went bounding up the back steps and raced along the west hallway of Bennington House. From afar off Adelaide heard him coming. Her door stood slightly ajar, and through its crack she saw his insane fury. Never had Florian seemed so mad, and Adelaide thought of fleeing across the hall to take refuge with Barbara. Too late. The demented husband might catch her. Of course, she could clear herself if he would only listen; and the terrified little figure hesitated as she glanced about for a hiding place. No. She must face him, be calm and gain time. Like many volatile women, Adelaide got excited over trifles, but could summon the most amazing composure to meet an actual danger. Frightened as she was, she sat down quickly at her dressing table and became occupied with some intricate rearrangement of hair. A mouthful of hairpins would serve as her pretext for silence while Florian talked himself out. Then she could handle him.

Her door opened violently, and Adelaide first saw the muzzle of a rifle; not that Florian planned to shoot her, but the weapon chanced to be in his hand. Then Florian himself towered like a god of vengeance upon her threshold. One moment he glared in crushing silence before producing the proof as she accused her:

"Madame, here's a note from your lover."

Adelaide had meant to be self-contained, to hold her temper as well as her tongue, but when French met French she sprang up with face as white as his was red, and exclaimed:

"My lover? You insult me!"

"Spare your theatricals, madame," he mocked. "I've caught you. Read that!"

"Let me see it!" She held out her hand for the note, but he snatched it away.

"So this is what you've been doing! This is why you've been taking long rides? Meetings at the lake? With a criminal?"

"Hush, Florian, hush! People will hear you!"

"I want them to hear! The whole world I shall proclaim it!"

"But listen to me, listen—"

"Why listen? Can I not read? Can I not see?" He tossed the note, kicked his helmet into a corner, and moved, crouching, toward her, with convulsive fingers working like a stranger's. "Did you meet Stuart Clayton?"

"I'm not sure, I—"

"Not sure? Mon Dieu! Madame is not sure! This set Rastley wild again, ruffling his hair and raving like a madman; he had the effect of steadying Adelaide as she whirled and thrust his face into her own.

"Madame, I command you to tell the truth!"

She threw back her head and laughed hysterically. "How can I tell the truth, until—"

"No, mon Dieu! You cannot tell the truth—"

"It's too funny," she chuckled. "Of course, this is 'our last meeting,' but it looks more like 'one lost mutton.' Florian, really you must complain to the postoffice authorities. This note is not for me."

"Not for you?" His dark eyes contracted to a keen little point sharp as his question. "You think to trick me like a fool? See! There's your name, A-d-e-l-a-i-d-e." He turned over the envelope and showed the address. Now, Madame, no more of your lies. Did you meet him? Now, or more of your lies. Did you meet him? Now, I tell you nothing." Adelaide frowned him defiantly, and repeated, "Nothing! Nothing!"

"You will tell me! I must find out!"

"Then find out for yourself—or ask Barbara!"

The husband flamed in helpless rage. He could not strike her, nor shoot, nor choke; and even his muddled senses realized that no human power could force Adelaide to talk.

"Madame," he said, "it is shameful to inquire of strangers, but I shall ask Barbara. They both turned as Barbara's voice came to them from the opposite room. "Oh, Florian," she called, "did you speak to me?"

"Yes, Barbara, yes." Adelaide answered quickly. "Do come here, please, please."

Now Florian saw that Adelaide's resistance was nearly gone, that she was calling for help.

Barbara had got Adelaide into trouble and must get her out. So she hurried to their open door and looked in with the question:

"What did you want to ask me?"

"O, Barbara, Barbara, do tell him—"

An arrogant gesture sealed his wife's lip, as the husband turned to Barbara:

"I have intercepted this love note for Mrs. Rastley, and—"

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It was a solemn place to sit and think, side by side with moaning monuments of death.

Nat dreaded to imagine who else it might be. Another old dropper? God shivers chased each other through him, and Nat wished himself safe at Bennington, with Mr. Rastley choking him half to death.

At a single glance he selected the nearest path out of that graveyard and started to run, when a horse nickered and raised its head.

"Do Stockin'foot!" he gasped. "Mister Stuart, what is you?"

No human voice replied, and Nat broke through the briars to where the sorrel stood hitched in a thick clump of myrtle. No rider. He stared all around, squinted under the cedars where that crazy Fearn woman lay in her drunken grave. "Mister Stuart! Mister Stuart!" he quavered, and the cedars shuddered at such unwanted disturbance.

"Huh!" Nat groaned. "Mister Stuart done come, an' gone—"

Uncle Nat Stark didn't hanker to visit this graveyard at all. He had approached it with slow, respectful pace, using every trick of woodcraft to avoid making a noise. But he didn't seem to care how much fuss he made in getting out. He whirled to leave and his foot caught in a vine, which started him off with a jump. After that Nat kept jumping and thrashing through the tangle until he scrambled into the public road, hit the ground running, and never looked behind. There was nothing behind him that Nat craved to see. Ahead of him lay Mr. Walker's store, and he aimed to get there before something that he didn't want to see might catch him. Like a comet at the apex of his dust tail, the duck legged sprinter rounded a bend in the road, and modified his orbit so as just to graze the front of Mr. Walker's steps.

As everybody knows, Josh Walker keeps a general mercantile shack on the east side of the main highway. In summer time Mr. Josh himself can always be seen upon its narrow gallery, or in winter huddled beside a tiny stove set among the sawdust for expeditor convenience. At this lonesome moment nobody sat upon Walker's gallery, where Nat hoped to greet companionship and protection.

Something else must have happened. Maybe Mr. Stuart had come up there to confer with Mr. Walker, and they had gone inside where folks couldn't see him.

Already Nat heard voices raised in dupe; twice he caught the name of "Clayton," mentioned in a tone which indicated that the owner of it was not present. These arguments at Walker's store were rarely important, for its patrons always wrangled; yet they might know something about where Mister Stuart had gone, and Nat latched to find out.

With a quick swerve he took the side track and turned in south of the store to listen at a window. Inside the brightly chinned proprietor was maintaining such hot debate against Mr. Sam McGillicut and Bud Shockey that none of them noticed a head which raised itself above their window sill. After catching a firm grip old Nat drew himself up until his white eyes searched the interior. Mr. Clayton was nowhere in the store, but Nat saw all the other folks, and could even hear snatches of what they said.

"It's mighty funny," Mr. Josh contended, "comin' home after twenty years—got arrested—Washington detectives. What you reckon that Clayton feller done?"

The paralyzed Negro let go his clutch of the window sill and dropped upon the ground. "Mister Stuart? Rested. Lawd! Lawd!"

Now he understood—the sorrel abandoned in the graveyard; the constables in the automobile; the nippers, and Nat also remembered his hunch.

"Dar now, Dey done grabbed Mister Stuart; done grabbed him."

Nothing could have hindered Uncle Nat from going into Walker's store to hear the harrowing details. Yet he took the precaution of circling around to the front and stroking in from the direction of Bennington.

"Howdy, Mister Josh, howdy, Mister Mac, Mister Bud." He spoke politely. "How's everybody? Please gimme a dime's worth o' tobacco; an' major say what's de news?"

Each ten cent purchase at Josh Walker's emporium carried with it a bonus of free information. Josh played no favorites and held back no gossip on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. With a dime plus of tobacco in hand, Nat presented his credentials and learned that the whole entire United States government had been hunting that Clayton feller—that the President's high detectives had just grabbed him—that he was being taken to Washington city in an automobile—that the President himself had come after him—with many sensational deductions from these established facts.

"Anyway, it's a cinch they got him," Josh

Walker slapped his counter most emphatically as he summed up the statistics.

"Trotter! Dat's de Gawd's troof!" Uncle Nat contributed his mite. "Dey was de same white men what I seed."

"You? You saw 'em?" All three gossip mongers crowded round the Negro, who now monopolized the spotlight. "Where'd you see 'em? What did they look like?"

"C'wae I seed 'em, wid my own eyes. Right at major's gate. Dey watted wid me 'bout was Mister Stuart Clayton come back home."

After McGillicut and Bud Shockey had asked all the fool questions they could think of Mr. Josh Walker employed his vacuum process to extract the contingent remainder from old Nat, drawing out all the facts that his witness desired to give up, with plenty more facts which were not so.

"Now! I've got the straight of it!" Mr. Josh congratulated himself.

While Nat never chipped about the sorrel in the graveyard nor the five dollar bill in his pocket, he molded public opinion at Walker's emporium, and old Josh himself announced: "Well! the only thing we don't know is, what did they git him for? Must be something big. Them Claytons never was pickers."

The conference at Walker's store had before it only the following facts: that a Marmon tenant had told another Negro who informed Bud Shockey that the President of the United States marshals had rushed off with Mr. Stuart Clayton in an automobile; but the wise Mr. Walker could give Nat no satisfaction as to when or where Mr. Clayton had been arrested.

For a gullible and garrulous Negro the aforesaid Nathaniel Stark at times knew how to button up his lip and give his tongue a holiday. This was one of the times. After Josh Walker felt satisfied that he had pumped Nat dry, all three members of the conference watched him shuffle out of the store and go plodding along the big road toward Bennington.

"Totin' the news to major," laughed Josh Walker.

The load of the news was heavy, and duck legged Nat proceeded northward, waddling like a flabby person, the gist of whose interior information had been removed. And not one of the white men suspected him of harboring a proclivity to deceive. All three of them would have testified that Uncle Nat had pulled his freight direct from the front steps of Bennington House, where Major Stark was sitting.

Yet the shrewd old Negro did nothing of the kind. While digesting the tattle absorbed at Walker's store, he put two and two together, making nineteen, and concluded that Mr. Walker must have got tired waiting for him at the graveyard and had started toward Bennington on foot, when the government constables grabbed him. This theory tallied with the Clayton impatience and accounted for his sorrel being left behind.

"I better git dat horse," he thought, "befo' any mo' humberg rises up."

Beneath the inquisitive eyes of Mr. Walker Uncle Nat steered a straight course down the middle of the big road, no farther than the bend where a patch of briars concealed him. There he executed his famous stunt of dodge and disappear, and began a counter-march under cover to the graveyard. If anybody had confidentially advised Josh Walker that Nat Stark would venture alone to the Fearn graveyard when the sun was less than an hour high, the experienced Mr. Walker would have snickered and observed that his informant didn't know a darn thing about niggers. As a matter of fact, Uncle Nat himself would never have believed it if he had not been present as a witness.

Booyed up by his excitement, he failed to see Mr. Scurry in the same old and new hat, and he did not recognize himself, walking straight to the sorrel horse, mounting, and proceeding cautiously through the woods until well out of hearing of the store. Then he got nervous, and his head hit the sorrel, and he fell, and he was struck by the forks of the road which led to Marmon.

"Now den, Mister Sorrel, I reckon you kin go de rest o' de way by yo' own self."

At the forks he climbed down, secured the bridle beneath the stirrup leathers, and slapped the sorrel on the rump. He had seen Mr. Scurry's horse left in the corral, and he hoped the horse would go home alone. Then Nat chuckled to himself: "Anyhow, dey won't rest Mister Stuart's horse."

His gallop from the graveyard to Marmon forks did not greatly increase the distance between Nat and Bennington. With light feet and lighter heart he started home, for it had just soaked into his bushy head that he could now return without danger of being massacred by Mr. Rastley. This blessed thought failed to hit him with the original volley of information received at Walker's store. He had then neglected to grasp one big outstanding fact—namely: that in putting a certain white man behind the bars his compensating government had likewise let down the bars that shut a certain Negro out of Bennington. All that Nat need do was to rush with his news of Clayton's arrest, and Mr. Rastley would forget everything else. Hotfoot Nat hustled while the news was hot.

Where foresight fails it is easy to review the disaster with omniscient hindsight and prophesy how it could have been avoided. Clayton's plan of campaign was sound enough, but his strategic key got lost when the enemy captured his courier.

All of his plans were progressing smoothly up to the time when his go-between had seated himself on the Bennington steps and remarked to Miss Barbara, "Mighty warm, ain't it?" For on the instant when Uncle Nat began diplomatic operations to deliver the note Stuart Clayton was leaving Marmon for the old Fearn graveyard, where he expected a reply. Clayton and Bart Scurry were then pushing their way on foot through a thicket to where the sorrel stood hitched. The men talked earnestly, and when they reached the horse Clayton paused.

"Well, Bart," he said, with an air of relief, "we are getting to the end of this business. The marshals will probably come tonight. They know I'm here."

"They ought to know it," answered Scurry; "the fat one has asked enough questions of our tenants. Thought maybe they'd show up some time today."

"No," Clayton shook his head. "I don't look for them until after dark. Keep your eyes peeled, and don't move ten feet from that horse. This Monday, the 16th; that long distance call is due today."

"Think it'll come through all right?" Scurry seemed doubtful.

"I think so. The man who is to send it is not being watched. And, Bart, take down every word. There may be important news today."

Never before had Bart Scurry mixed in

such a mess. Frankly, he didn't like it. Burly and big faced as he was, and fifty-one years old, the notion of dodging about under cover made him nervous. For nineteen years he had managed the Marmon plantation with honesty and success, but managed it in the open, where every man might scrutinize every transaction. Although devotedly loyal to the Claytons, Scurry hated this mysterious homecoming, with all its subterfuges, and the unknown that followed. Yet, no matter what his private feeling might be, he would carry out orders to the very letter. Now he leaned against a sapling and listened.

"Bart," the younger man gathered up his bridle. "I'm riding toward the old Fearn graveyard and shall return in perhaps an hour by the lake road. Send a man to the forks if you see this dangerous for me to come home."

As the boss was about to ride Scurry stopped him and offered a blue barreled forty-four, butt first.

"You forgot this," he said.

"I meant to leave it."

"Tain't no way to tell what might come up? I'm afraid."

"No, Bart," Clayton pushed back the weapon. "If I should run across the marshals they'll only be doing their duty, and I couldn't run the risk of killing one."

"That's so," Bart admitted; "but I'd hate to see 'em get you. Better lemme go with you."

"Thanks, old man." The horseman leaned down and grasped his manager's hand. "I've got to chance this alone. So long."

When Stuart Clayton declined the pistol and rode away unarmed, it was not of federal officers that he was thinking, but of another man, a husband, who must in no event be harmed.

Matters were still progressing without a hitch. At the minute when old Nat at Bennington seemed just on the brink of persuading Mrs. Rastley to come and select her pup young Clayton turned his back upon Scurry and rode away from Marmon, leaving his manager in the underbrush.

Lake Marmon is one of those abandoned coils which the Mississippi river casts aside in its contortions through the valley. Placid water reflects the mossy beards of many a cypress, gives back the greenery of canebrakes, and duplicates, star for star, the brilliant northern night. One day, long ago, followed a road which skirts the lake, then branches southward toward Vicksburg, while its northern fork turns to the left and runs on past Bennington. Here he took the northern fork, then thought of a lousier to leave the highway and reach his objective by footpaths through the woods.

This proved a simple matter. Nobody had seen him coming, and few stragglers ever ventured near the ill reputed burying ground. He dismounted, hitched his sorrel, and sat on a fallen tombstone waiting for old Nat.

In the vicissitudes of his active life young Clayton had accomplished a variety of things, and many of them were exceedingly well done. But sitting and waiting was not headlined upon his catalogue of virtues. Even during a few rare interludes of tranquility he would find himself unable to lounge at ease while his plans developed. Now he had scarcely sat down before he sprang up, and repeated himself only to rise again. He strode to the north wall, he gazed toward Bennington, he whirled to the south wall, glanced in that direction, and strode back, and he thought of Adelaide as being free. Nor could he permit Maj. Stark to imagine that a Clayton had pressed attentions upon a married guest beneath the roof at Bennington. Much evil might be gossiped of him when he was gone, but his hidden and undisturbed never be said. If he failed to see Adelaide then he would tell Miss Stark.

Meanwhile, where was old Nat? Why had he not come? Clayton got up and listened; then he sat down again and looked at his watch—two minutes and eleven seconds had passed. Human nature is never the same no longer. Even the most patient of Claytons, whose sweetheart had just told him that she was married, could not sit still forever on a tombstone waiting for a lazy Negro to turn up. This particular Clayton never waited for a thing to turn up; he always attached a spade and began digging. His next recollection carried him beyond the north wall and out to the roadside along which he expected Uncle Nat. The Negro was not in sight. He must have slipped just around the bend, so Clayton ventured farther to meet him—taking care to meet no one else.

In the dusky stretch of highway which he could now see there appeared no duck legged patriarch, and Clayton chanced it to the next bend. Then he kept adventuring and changing, going nearer and nearer to Bennington.

His recollections of Bennington house were childishly vivid to Stuart Clayton. During his long exile in Central America there was never a time when the homesick boy could not shut both eyes and see all things as they used to be, the roadway, the bayou winding through a pasture, the clumpy hedge of cherokee yaws, and the smooth cut lawn which lay beyond; the broad steps, the white pillars, the expanse of gallery. Among these familiar surroundings he might easily have found his way in the dark.

By going through the pasture on his left and following a bayou he would come out behind the cherokee hedge at the south side of the house; and he chose this route for his approach. He climbed the fence and kept behind the hedge, precisely as old Nat had done at the agile beginning of his departure; except that Clayton traveled in the opposite direction and stopped where Nat had started, at the broken panel in the fence. A faint trail, worn by Nat and the dogs, had led him in sight. Here he could see a part of the front gallery, and the devil had laid a trap to snare a lover it could not have been more craftily set. In the house and about the grounds nobody stirred; he saw no one except Dr. Humphreys on the gallery, placidly smoking his pipe.

As he approached under cover of the hedge Clayton did not observe Mrs. Rastley. After her stormy interview with Florian the flustered creole had come out into the open, in plain view, where no ridiculous husband could raise another scene. That's how it happened that she now sat beneath an arched wisteria, in the narrow side yard between hedge and house, while Rastley fed his grouch by peering through a lace curtain at the parlor window, and glooping upon his wife.

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