

# The WANTED MAN by Harris Dickson

FINAL INSTALLMENT.  
Barbara Intervenes.

WITH the resolute tread of a general, Barbara left Uncle Nat at the steps and marched diagonally across the back yard to her garage. Her mind was made up, definitely and irrevocably, for now she knew. She knew that Clayton had been led to Bennington by her own deception, beginning in a jest, of course. Externations or no externations, a lie is a lie, and Barbara never covered behind polite phrases. She felt responsible for what had happened, for the delay in his splendid purpose, and ashamed to look herself in the face if he should fall because of her.

In Barbara's uplifted mood she wanted to confront the major at once, to beard the old Stark lion in his den, and tell him that it was his own daughter, not Adelaide Rastly, who had been meeting Clayton at the lake; and the note should have been addressed to Miss Stark. When her father first spoke of knowing about the note, Barbara had sprung up from her window to go in before them all and tell the whole truth. But that would only start an endless wrangle, and Clayton would never get away. No, Barbara had a practical head, and she'd help him in a practical way, then come home and fight it out with her father.

The notion tickled Barbara. She laughed in anticipation of their candid family gathering, with Florian jawing at Adelaide, and Adelaide spitting back, while the major bluntly swore that if a Stark woman had made a darn fool of herself, she must let no other woman, or man, suffer by it. How he'd storm and rage, with picturesque denunciations of his daughter's trystings, and her midnight drive with Clayton to Vicksburg. Of course the doctor would put in a few honest words. And Barbara could say what she thought about Florian—which alone would be worth the price of admission. They'd hold an open session, free for all, where every fellow spoke his mind regardless of sore toes, or who got mad. Let them all get mad, the madder the better. Then things would clear up, with combatants and neutrals knowing precisely where they stood. It was a lovely powder magazine, and Barbara itched to fire it on the instant she came back from Vicksburg.

But first she must square herself by speaking Clayton on his way, and telling him the truth. Moreover, Barbara had the devil in her bigger than a mule, and—what an adventure!

Straight to the garage she went, took down her ulster from its peg, and her goggles. Two swift hands tucked up her hair beneath the cap, and Barbara was ready. Without lights, her phantom automobile slipped along the driveway, passed out of Bennington gate, and halted under the big oak.

If Barbara's fairy godmother had greased the coils of happy chance, its wheels could not have revolved more smoothly. In the black intimacy of night her purring car stood unobtrusively beneath the oak; and its driver seemed only a gibbous blot. The girl advanced with a most delicious exaltation, and her competent fingers gripped the wheel, as she heard the steps of men who avoided the gravelled path and trod soundlessly upon the turf beside it. They were coming, and spoke no word, not even the incessant gabble, Nat. He led Clayton directly to her car, himself opening the rear door with a cautious "Get in here, Mister Stuart. Get in."

It seemed most singular, but when Clayton stepped into the automobile he caught again the same elusive breath of new mown hay, with its memories of the lake and of Adelaide. Imagination? Yes. But imagination strangely real, and very near, so near that the excited lover must always take it with him.

Perhaps it was this which gave the sweetness to his voice as he settled back on the rear cushion and reached out a hand to Uncle Nat.

"Good-by," he said. "Good-by, my faithful friend; I'll never forget how you have stuck to me."

"Suttinly, Mister Stuart, suttinly. I done all I could to help you. Thankee sutt; thankee sutt."

In the darkness Barbara couldn't see what it was that Clayton laid upon the Negro's palm, but it was enough of something to make old Nat stand bowing and waving his hat as the car pulled out for her long race. Not until they were gone did Uncle Nat strike a match and examine the size of various bank notes. "Huh!" he grunted; "dat's a heap better'n gittin' jes twenty dollars from Mister Foxyjaw."



"Then you don't need me any more?"  
She was standing close to him.  
Again the perfume of new mown hay came to him, disconcertingly.

A silent shape at the wheel had never opened its lips; yet when Clayton leaned forward and touched her shoulder, Barbara felt herself trembling.

"To Marmion," he ordered, "and drive like hell."

Then Clayton gave thanks for a reticent chauffeur who merely nodded. With so much that he was leaving behind and so much of uncertainty that he was rushing to meet, it would have maddened him to talk with a gabbling Negro. Of chatter there was none. The driver seemed a noiseless part of his machine.

Their speedy car sprang forward, and dusty miles began unwinding from its tires. Although very early in the night, the roads were deserted, which the brooder accepted gratefully. Ever a man of action, tonight he yearned for peace; he ached to lean back in his corner and dream of her, the perfume of whose presence followed him. A clump of myrtles beside the road gave out the baffling scent; a patch of ripening plums puffed new mown hay into his face; fields of young cotton taunted him with reminiscent odors.

Presently he could see the lake upon his right, her lake, their lake. Its gleaming waters lay placid beneath the stars, calm and unstirred by the turmoil which they roused. Of what had there befallen, Stuart Clayton could take nothing with him, save only his memories, and that persistent perfume.

All was dark, except the shining waters, when straight ahead he saw a flash, a glimmer, a dazzle amongst the trees. They were meeting another car, and he drew back in shadow to avoid the headlight. Two great eyes glared momentarily upon him as his own driver swerved aside and then swept on, once more in darkness. But that single shaft of light had shown him something, a totally unexpected something which startled him. Before that time he had scarcely glanced at his chauffeur, had only gained the impression of slenderness, and of a steady skill which gave him confidence. His driver was an agency by which he'd get to Vicksburg, and that was all he wanted.

Yet, by the revelation of the passing head-

light, he imagined that he saw something in the tilt of the cap, something in the poise of the shoulders, something perhaps in the reiterated suggestion of new mown hay, something that made him sit up and peer more closely. It was so densely dark that he could only see the back of a head, not the head of a man, but rather of a graceful boy. The face, he felt sure, was white. The voice he had not heard, for its driver had never spoken.

Clayton had lived through much that day, and many doubts yet lay before him, doubts that must be solved as they arose. Here was a doubt that could not wait for solution. He moved forward—without touching the shoulder in front of him—and inquired, "Do you know these roads?"

For reply he gained a nod, only a nod.

"You can reach Vicksburg by midnight?" Another nod, more decisive and emphatic; his chauffeur neither turned nor spoke. They were now approaching Marmion Forks, and Clayton wanted to hear the voice, so he asked a question that he supposed could not be answered by a nod:

"Which road do you take to Vicksburg?"

Not yet was he clever enough to trap her, for the unspoken dummy made no sound as the left arm arose and pointed southward.

"No," Clayton objected. "That's the Marmion road."

The head shook, and the right arm lifted, indicating the lower end of the lake with a gesture which followed its curving banks. It was only a gesture, but enough. No two women in all this woman crowded world possessed the same little tricks of nod and shrug and gesture as Adelaide. He recognized her, and struggled to hush the triumph in his voice before speaking.

"Adelaide, what are you doing?"

"Driving this car."

"Why did you come?"

"To take you to Vicksburg."

"Maj, Stark should have sent another chauffeur."

"He didn't get a chance."

"What will Mr. Rastly say?"

"Oh I don't know!" with the tantalizing

laugh which had so goaded him at the lake. "When Florian finds out that I have driven away with you, it might be amusing to hear what he will say."

Then Barbara laughed again, a reckless, headstrong laugh. All day long the perversity of Implah devils had possessed her, terrifying Adelaide, lashing Florian into frenzy, chuckling at the coming explosion of her father; and at the lake eluding this very

seemed clear. This girl could not possibly travel in a munition laden ship, with a crew of fighting men, pirates, adventurers, and machine guns. No, she must turn back home before they missed her from Bennington.

"Adelaide," he decided, and unlatched the car door. "Let me out. I can walk from here—get a horse, and—"

"Better not try to get out," she pressed down stronger on the accelerator and warned him. "Keep your seat or break your neck! O! O!"

Suddenly, almost too late, Barbara saw a horseman in their road, galloping madly toward them. A desperate grinding of her emergency, a short skidding in the dust, and her car stopped, trembling, crosswise of the highway.

"It's Mr. Bart Scurry!" she exclaimed.

The sorrel had reared and come down all a quiver as Clayton bounded out of the car and ran to Scurry, crying, "Any news, Bart? Any news?" at the same time fending Scurry away from the Bennington car.

With headlights throwing the two men in bold relief, Barbara saw Mr. Scurry tumble from his horse and thrust a paper into Clayton's hand. The glare was bright as day, and Clayton read, with Bart's stubby fingers pointing out and helping to decipher the words. At first Clayton seemed incredulous and looked up at Bart, like a child that does not believe what he sees. Then it came Barbara's turn to be amazed, for the self-contained young Clayton, who had held his temper and his indignation, now capered about in the dust, flinging up his broad brimmed hat and yelling triumphantly:

"Viva Cardoval! Viva Yandell! Viva! Viva!" his voice ringing like a battle cry through the stillness of the woods. He ran to Bart Scurry and hugged him, danced around and yelled again, "Bart! Bart! That's the most glorious news a man ever got. Glorious! Viva! Viva Yandell!"

Barbara could stand it no longer. She sprang out and rushed to the men, calling in advance, "What is it, Mr. Scurry? What is it?"

Whatever it was that might have occurred in far away Salamanca, it did not mystify Bart Scurry nearly as much as the miracle that he witnessed before his eyes. Here was Miss Stark; he knew her by sight, but had never presumed even to lift his hat when passing her in the road. To him the Stark and Clayton feud was an immutable fact, no more to be transgressed than the laws of gravity. Here he saw the daughter of Maj. Kenneth Stark, with eyes ashine and flushed face, running through the dust to seize his own hand—Bart Scurry's hand—and say, "What is it, Mr. Scurry? What is it?"

Scurry had a bigger face than any man alive, and could therefore spread more of bewilderment across it. Off came his hat, and he stood mute.

"Tell me, Mr. Scurry," Barbara begged and insisted. "Please tell me, too."

He couldn't tell her anything. Bart could only stand aghast and blurt out unbelievably, "Miss Stark!"

Then Clayton stared and shut up. The last peal of a "Viva Yan—" broke off short in his throat as he gazed from the girl to his crazy manager and asked, "Bart, what do you mean?"

"I didn't mean any harm," the manager apologized, as the girl caught Clayton's arm and said:

"Yes, Stuart, yes; I'm Barbara Stark. What has happened?"

The shouting man forgot his friend in prison; his victorious comrades in Salamanca ceased to exist; the whole world was at his elbow, there could be no other world, as he repeated stupidly:

"Miss Stark?"

"Yes, you goose!" she laughed at his incredulity. "But what is all this excitement about?"

"O, the excitement? It's nothing much. Just a telephone message—from New Orleans. There's been a revolution in Salamanca. My friends have taken Col. Yandell out of prison and put the Vulture in the same cell. It's all over—all over."

"Splendid! Splendid!" Barbara burst out in jubilation. "Then you don't have to go away?"

"No." He shook his head as if this were no time to be thinking of Salamanca, and repeated again in a whisper, "Miss Stark."

Neither of them said another word, until the silence grew embarrassing to the middle aged manager who was scared of women anyhow. Bart Scurry stirred the dust with his awkward feet, braced up a little, and volunteered:

"Mr. Clayton, they come an' got Rafe Jer' now—that long distance message from New Orleans oughter be answered right off—

they say your ship is a waitin' for Mr. Clayton's orders to sail—"

"The ship car wait," was all that Clayton answered, like a man groping for his muddled faculties, and watching Barbara.

All of a sudden Barbara felt a vacant sense of disappointment and failed in trying to laugh as she said:

"Well, I seem to be out of a job?"

There stood the brave little car, useless now, and her own competent hands that were not needed. But Clayton did not fully grasp her feelings as he also looked at the car and said:

"Yes. There's no use of my going to Vicksburg."

"Then you don't need me any more?" She was standing close to him, looking down and drawing a queer diagram with her toe in the dust as she repeated, "Then you don't need me."

Again the perfume of new mown hay came to him, definitely and disconcertingly. He made no answer. Of course, she must go home, and he would return to Marmion.

"Good-by," she half whispered, and held out her hand, which he took without a word—and kept without a thought. And Clayton did not know when it was that he put his arm around her; nor was Barbara certain how long it had been there when she became conscious of not interfering. Only Bart Scurry knew. According to Bart's best guess, Clayton's arm had encircled Miss Stark just about three seconds prior to the moment when Bart turned his back, mounted the embarrassed sorrel, and galloped out of sight.

Other uncounted intervals passed before they missed him, then Barbara glanced around and suggested, "Stuart, Mr. Scurry's gone."

"O, has he?"

"Yes. We can't stand here in the road by ourselves. Get back in the car and let me drive you home."

"No," he protested, "I can walk. It's better for you."

"Makes no difference to me," the girl laughed recklessly. "Might as well take you home. I'm snake bit, and going to die anyhow. I'll have a terrible time with father."

When her car rolled on again, with Clayton also on the front seat, his disclosed chauffeur headed her lights for Marmion, but did not travel so rapidly, nor with such precision. Her car moved zigzag, like the wobbly experiments of a novice at the wheel. Sometimes it crept; sometimes it scarcely went at all. The wheels veered crazily to either side, when there was plenty of roadway. What happened within their car was legibly written upon the dust. Presently the moving tires, having writ, stopped writing. The car halted and stood, and continued to halt and stand.

All of a sudden that little car seemed to make up its mind. It backed, it turned with decision. It ran firm and straight as an arrow, speeding northward to Bennington.

"Now!" laughed Barbara, "we'll hold a family conference."

The Stark and Clayton feud broke out afresh. Within the narrow limits of Miss Barbara's pantry two clansmen fought their fight.

Aunt Calline claimed her privilege to serve the champagne. Uncle Nat didn't do much claiming against a woman, but clung manfully to his ice cream freezer, in which he kept cooling a quart bottle among the icy slush.

"Git away fum here, ole nigger!" Aunt Calline tried to shove him aside. "Major's been savin' dis here champagne ever since de war, an' I'm gwine to tote it in."

"No you ain't. I is."

"Ain't I nussed Miss Barbara from a baby?"

"Mebbe so," old Nat admitted, "but you's likewise been lowratin' Mistah Stuart Clayton. An' dat sort o' talk don't go no mo', not in dis house. Huh! Better not let major hear you neither. Glims dat tray." Without allowing Aunt Calline's eliminated hands to touch the glasses, Old Nat arranged his tray for six.

"Now, den," he planned; "dece two glasses, dey's fer Mister an' Mrs. Rasmie. Set dem two close together, cause dem young folks is no mighty lovin'. Lawd, Lawd, Calline! Mister Rasmie done promised Mrs. Rasmie a pearl necktie, an' take her to New Tawk, an' give her a brand new automobile, an—huh! I ain't never seed Mister Rasmie act so nice."

"An' dis glass, dat's fer de doctor, he's steppin' high, like a rooster in deep mud. An' dis here glass, dat's fer de major hisself, to 'spose deir health."

"Now, dece two, dey's de main two, fer Miss Barbara Stark an' Onable Stuart Clayton. Dat make six, one fer each o' dem white folks in de parlor. Now den, Aunt Calline, you kin foller behin' wid de tray, whilst I travels ahead an' totes dis bottle."

In the lead of his proud procession, Uncle Nat went marching through the hallway, like a cup bearer to their majesties. A stream of light flowed out from the parlor door, and the major's rounded shadow darkened it as he appeared and shouted:

"O, Nat! Uncle Nat! Fetch seven glasses. Mr. Clayton insists that you are to have yours in here—you've been such a good old friend."

"Egactly, major. Suttinly. One mo' glass, suh. Egactly, suh, egactly."  
[The End.]

[Copyright: 1922: By Harris Dickson.]