

THE TIGER TRAIL

by Edison Marshall Illustrations by PAUL FREHM



WHAT HAS HAPPENED BEFORE—

Dr. Long, out fishing with Alexander Pierce, a detective, tells of his projected trip to Southern Downs. Pierce advises him to keep his eyes wide open while there. On the way in a train Dr. Long is attracted by a girl, who later faints. Dr. Long treats her, and looking into her bag, is astounded to find a loaded revolver.

Dr. Long meets Ahmad Das, an Oriental, who conducts him to Southley Downs, where he meets Mr. Southley and his son, Ernest Southley, Mr. Hayward and his son, Vilas, and then Josephine Southley, who is the girl he had met on the train. Josephine tells him the story of Southley Downs and its ghost, which is not the ghost of a human being but of a tiger.

Dr. Long has a quarrel with Vilas Hayward over Josephine, and finds that the Haywards have a strange authority over the Southleys. He is ordered to leave Southley Downs. The rain prevents him leaving at once. Dr. Long and Ernest go out on the road in the rain looking for the tracks of a tiger that Ernest says are there.

They find the tracks. Later Ernest and Dr. Long see a prowling creature in the hall at Southley Downs. This frightens the elder Hayward, who also sees it. Ernest begins to feel that Ahmad Das is perpetrating some devilry.

The elder Hayward is later found dead, his neck broken as if by a giant's blow.

Now read on—

"It is even an intruder's business to be watchful, at a time like this. I believe you'd better try to get some sleep."

"Still the doctor—but there are no personal wishes involved this time." She even had the spirit to smile at me.

But I couldn't answer that smile. The scene in the den had struck home too hard.

"Professional interest alone," I told her.

Maybe it was just the effect of the dawn that her eyes seemed to lose their luster before my gaze. She hurried on up the hall, turning at the door of her own room.

"Thank you for your watchfulness," she called to me. "And I'm sorry I spoke so rudely when you first spoke to me—and I don't expect any other—but professional interest—now. If there was anything that I could say—about last night—I'd say it, too. But I know it wouldn't help any."

"I can't imagine that it would."

"But at least—you are not going home today."

"The storm decided that matter for me, I'm afraid. But there may be a chance yet."

The door shut behind her. The early morning hours drew on, and the mist that was the twilight of dawn faded like rain.

One of the negroes had built a little fire in the library, and Southley joined me here. And in a moment Ahmad Das opened the door from the dining room.

He stood straight and calm and unruffled, not an expression that the eyes of man could read on his impassive face as he called us in to breakfast.

After breakfast Ernest and I went down to the scene of the murder. It would be several hours before the coroner came; and I thought that any obvious clues should be collected and preserved at once. Such things have mysterious ways of disappearing.

We had no difficulty in locating the exact spot where the body had been. Even the rain had not washed away that evidence. My first work was to look about for footprints. There were none to be seen. The place was covered with a rich growth of grass, and root-filled turf as a rule does not receive a very clear imprint. Besides, the rains would have washed away any imprint that had been made.

We were no more successful in finding a weapon with which the crime could have been committed. We searched the hillside with the greatest possible care; and even waded a short distance into the swamp. Of course it seemed like that any blunt instrument that could have inflicted the wound could have been easily tossed into the swamp water, from which it could not be recovered until the waters receded again.

Although it was inundated to a depth of six feet now, it was perfectly clear that the isthmus was still above the surface of the water at the moment of the murder. It was not covered until the final wreckage of the levee, several minutes afterward. It would have been possible for the murderer to have raced across

the isthmus to the opposite high lands before the wall of water came. In that case he was still to be found in the thick jungle beyond.

Since the light had made its possible, we had put a negro in an upstairs window with a powerful pair of field glasses. If the murderer was indeed in refuge in the thick jungles, the glasses would reveal any attempt he should make to escape. His only hope would be to keep the plateau itself between him and the house, a feat that would become increasingly difficult as he neared the mainland.

And it was true the water was too deep to wade. He would either have to construct a raft, or else risk his life in a long, desperate swim.

The watch was kept like the guard of an army camp. It was continuous. When the negro was obliged to leave his post another took his place.

We picked up a few surface clues. We found a man's hat; but it was perfectly evident that it was the hat Hayward had worn. I had not particularly noticed it as he went out the door; yet Ernest recognized it as the same expensive felt hat that he had seen the elder Hayward wearing on many previous occasions. It contained no initials or any other sign of ownership, and it had a trademark of a hatter in the State capital.

But the place it lay was somewhat significant. It was ten full paces farther up the slope than the place where we found the body.

"Could we have dropped it off when we carried the body to the house?" Ernest asked.

"When I lifted the head the hat was already off," I replied.

"Then you see what that means?" He looked at me darkly.

"It means that part of the struggle occurred higher up the slope, or else some violent action at that point knocked the hat from his head. It seems to me there would be signs—deeper—imprints—if the first was the case; and more likely that he saw or heard his enemy for the first time when he was on this point of the path."

"He must have been on his way down to the driveway then."

"Of course."

"He certainly could not have seen well in the darkness. He might have heard though, or felt."

"Perhaps he could make out a shadow. Likely he started to run, and his hat fell off at the first leap."

"The levee was already breaking then. He must have heard its faint signs. It seemed likely he must have known that retreat by way of the roadway to the city was already cut off. Then why—and the eyes bored mine—did he run in the opposite direction from the house, rather than toward it? We found the body ten yards farther down the slope."

"Men in such terror as he must have been are not particularly careful which way they run. They only want to get away in any direction."

"But the most frightened man won't run in the face of the danger. It is perfectly evident then that his foe came behind him—between his own position and the house."

"That seems to be indisputable."

"The murderer must have chased him."

"Of course."

"And he must have been unbelievably fleet. It was true that Hayward was a large man physically, and would not ordinarily have been able to run very fast. But in such terror as he was, he would have run faster than an expert track man. You know, Long, that no man ever really runs until he is in terror. Some reserve power and strength comes to his aid. You remember that from your own boyhood—the way you could get away from a watermelon patch when the owner got out his shotgun. He ran somewhat downhill, so every condition was with him for a fast flight. And yet his enemy caught up with him within ten yards!"

"It is an important fact, Ernest."

"It certainly is. Police records show that in very few cases have crimes been committed by a criminal actually overtaking a fleeing victim when they were both on foot. The victim's fear makes him the fleetest; and the criminal has only the strength of his purpose to make him fleet. Yet Hayward was overtaken in ten yards."

"Yes."

"He probably ran screaming—a sound that could not be heard above the roar of the storm."

I agreed to this, too.

"It's no ordinary crime, Long. The murderer had no ordinary motives. His passion, his blood madness, if I may use the word, must have been just as terrific an emotion as Hay-

ward's fear—an emotion that inspired him to run fast enough down that slope to overtake his prey within ten yards."

"I don't believe I like the word prey in this capacity, Ernest," I told him. "There's an inference in it that isn't soothing to the spirit. But there isn't any doubt about the fury and intensity of the slayer. There's another element that proves it even more clearly than the fact that he overtook Hayward within ten yards."

"What is that?"

"The terrible, rending violence of the blow. A cold-blooded murderer wouldn't have struck like this. The slayer would have waited in the darkness—struck from ambush with a Billy or knife or pistol. Now look at this."

I showed Ernest the imprint in the turf where the body had lain. It was singularly deep and distinct.

"Does it mean anything to you?" I asked.

"Do you mean that the blow was so violent that Hayward was simply knocked into the earth when he fell?"

"Nothing else. It is likely that he never moved or cried out after that blow struck him down. He was hurled to the ground with such force that he left this imprint—as if a meteor had smote him. The neck was broken—a clean, violent break. I knew it when I examined the body."

We found one other clue that for a little while made us hopeful. It was one-half of a cuff-link, broken sharply off. It was a rich thing, of gold and a single ruby. Then we walked back toward the house.

"I suppose you'll know where suspicion will point," Ernest said, just before we reached the steps.

We stopped, face to face.

"Good Heavens, man! Don't you think I have eyes? No one can help but see the way things point—and there's nothing in this world to do but cover our eyes and yell coincidence! But the detectives that come in the boat today—they'll be fresh and have clear eyes. And they'll suspect Ahmad Das. He was the one man that was out on the hillside with Hayward at the moment of the murder."

"Of course. Although it is true he started in another direction."

"You remember that he took a long time to get down to the garage. He might have waited for Hayward on the trail—then circled back to the garage and only pretended to look for him. I don't say it's true, but that's what the coroner and the detectives will suggest."

"But why didn't he strike him as he went past, instead of chasing the screaming man down the hill?"

"Who knows! There might be such a thing as missing his first blow, and knowing that only by silencing the man's lips could he be saved from an attempted murder charge. At least, Ahmad Das will be suspected. And the crowning point is that he hated Hayward."

"And Hayward hated him," I agreed.

"Next after Ahmad, the negroes will be suspected, charged with being in the pay of either your father or me, or possibly you."

"Yes, all of them will be investigated."

"Vilas won't be accused—very naturally—and of course my sister won't. It would take more than a

woman's strength, or even the strength of any other than a large, powerful man, to administer such a blow as killed Hayward."

We had now halted below the veranda.

"There's one thing to remember," I told him.

"What is that?"

"Another thing to wonder at. As you say, only a powerful man, or something very powerful, could have dealt that blow. A man could not have done it, except with some great, heavy weapon that by its own weight would gather tremendous momentum. It was dark, and the two of them were in mad flight down the hill. Then think what wonderful accuracy, what perfect muscle control, was necessary for the pursuer to swing his weapon and strike the fleeing figure in front of him in the darkness—a blow as accurate as that with which a butcher fells a steer. It doesn't seem hardly human."

He started up the steps, and turned with a little laugh that was somewhat very grim. "You might as well quit looking for things to be human—around this house," he told me.

"Abandon such hope—ye who enter Just then we heard the voice of the watchman, bellowing down the stairs. His glass had revealed the shadow of a boat upon the far reaches of the marsh.

At first the boat was just a black speck so far distant that we could not tell whether it was some one escaping from the plateau or a boat from the mainland.

"If tis the murderer, and he's getting away, there's no chance to stop him," Southley said. "We can't get word to the other side in time."

The speck was hard to follow. There were so many tree clumps and thickets that hid it. But slowly it became apparent that the boat was drawing nearer, and that it had a smaller craft, evidently a large row-boat, in tow. And within a half-hour more we could distinguish its occupants.

The large craft—a long, low motor boat—contained five men. Of course, one of them was the negro I had sent, one was evidently the skipper or owner of the craft, and two of the others were the coroner and his assistant. My hope lay in the fifth. If my telegram had gone true to its destination, tonight there would be new forces to cope with this problem of Southley Downs.

Most of the male occupants of the house were down at the edge of the progress was slow. They constantly faced the danger of snags and submerged shrubbery that might wreck the motor boat. Ernest called to them, and showed how they might make a landing in the deep water beside the isthmus.

At first we couldn't see their faces. The glitter of the water prevented it. But when at last they drew close it was with the sense of the deepest disappointment to me. I looked in vain for the face I had hoped to see.

No one could mistake the coroner. He looked the part—somber clothes and all; he had the voice, too—those unmistakable tones of a confirmed mourner who knows all flesh is dust. His assistant was a rather sprightly young man, with the gloom of his profession yet to come upon him. The man who steered the boat was a

character not unfamiliar to those who know the waterways. He seemed to be a quaint, good-natured old chap with sparkling eyes and bushy beard—a man evidently sixty years of age and still sprightly as a chickadee.

The mission had evidently not affected him at all. He called us a cheery greeting as the boats drew up. When he rose to make the motor boat fast, all of us saw that his garb fitted the rest of him. He wore an old, mud-bespattered suit, and queer little rubber boots that were tied with strings and came just to his ankles, making a ludicrous bag of each of his trouser legs.

Sam, the colored man, was in the back of the boat, and next to him sat a lean, thin-faced man I had never seen before. But he had an official air, and I guessed him right as an inspector from a near-by city—a man on the plain-clothes force. He was an alert, determined man with a distinct air of authority.

My first words were with Sam. He swore that he had sent my telegram to the address I had indicated.

"I waited an hour for an answer,

and none came." Sam told me. "I could not wait no more. The detective gen'man said we had to go without him—and like as not he wouldn't be no good, nohow."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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