

THE TIGER TRAIL

by Edison Marshall

Illustrations by PAUL FREHM



It was after nine when I saw the flash of a lantern across the water. Thin clouds were in the sky, and the moon had not yet risen. The whole wilderness world was blotted out by the shadow, and the soft light over the water brought a queer flood of thoughts. I welcomed its approach. At the moment it seemed the only reminder that life still existed about this great, bleak estate of the Southleys. Without it, it might have seemed a realm of death, where human beings never came. And besides, the great Alexander Pierce was returning from his expedition, and I did not know but that this gleam across the wastes was the breaking of the light of truth in the darkness.

I heard steps behind me. It was Inspector Freeman.

"I see he's coming just at the time he promised," he said with a note of wonder.

The boat drew up to the shore, and the colored men got out to make it fast. The lantern light was dim, and I could not see plainly. It seemed to me that something was huddled in the bottom of the boat—something rather large—but I couldn't see what it was because a rubber tarpaulin had been thrown over it. But I did see Alexander's face. He held the lantern up to look at us, and it showed his features plainly. He seemed curiously intent.

We walked up the path, and three shadows made black streaks across the light that the lantern threw. They were of the three Southleys, who had come out of the house to meet us. They also seemed grave, determined. Something gleamed in the old man's hand. As Alexander held the lantern high, I saw what it was. It was a pistol.

"What's this?" Alexander asked. "Vilas' pistol," Southley replied. "You told me to get it."

"How did you do it without arousing suspicion?"

"Took it from the drawer in the library table. He keeps it there in the daytime. Usually carries it at night. Ernest and I left him with the excuse that we had to talk to some of the colored laborers at their cottages. Josephine ust slipped away."

Alexander turned to Ernest. "How about the candles?"

"Two burning in the library. All the others have been misplaced, as you directed."

"And the servants?"

"No one in the house but Ahmad. The inspector suddenly gasped,

"But I tell you that isn't safe," he cried. "He'll get away. Alexander, you promised to keep a watch out for him. He'll be gone when we get to the house."

"I promised I'd see that he didn't run away," Alexander answered wearily. "He'll be there when we come. Don't fear, inspector." He turned to the others. "Then everything is ready. Miss Southley—if you will go with Inspector Freeman. His arm is strong and his aim sure. Southley, you and Ernest can take the south windows. You, Long, will be an unprejudiced witness. But you've got to know how to walk silently."

"I know how. I've stalked deer in the West."

"Good. Then you'll come with me. And now—out goes the light."

He lifted the lantern and turned down the wick. Then he blew out the flame. Of course I understood. In our present position at the base of the hill, it would not be visible from the windows of the house. It would be visible as we approached the house.

And just as the shadows fell a hand touched mine. It was a warm hand, and soft, and the fingers rested a single fluttering instant in my palm. It was a little hand, too, and I had in a single instant of never-to-be-forgotten knowledge of its power to soothe and hold, and a tenderness beyond all reckoning. And I knew whose hand it was.

"Maybe you can understand after this," she whispered. "Perhaps you won't condemn me so."

Then like a squad replying in battle, we started climbing up the slope of the hill.

We soon left the others in the darkness. Alexander and I crept to the postern door.

"One sound will spoil the play," he whispered to me in the instant that we waited at its threshold. "Keep your ears and eyes open."

Then we crept through into the little hall. The door into the library was open, but scarcely any light came through. So deep was the shadow that Alexander was at once invisible.

We lay down on the opposite sides of the hall, so that we could look through into the library. But we left the passage open, as Alexander had instructed. The reason was simply that he thought the man we had come to watch might want to make an escape through the doorway, and it would have spoiled the plan for him to see us on the way out. Lying close to the walls, it was likely he would

pass us by. But after one glance through the doorway I felt sure that no such attempt would be made. The darkness of the hillside where Hayward had died would, in this man's mind, seem more terrible than the room itself.

The library at Southley Downs was tremendously long. It had rows of windows at one end, and the other opened into the hall. The tapestries and furnishings were rather dark, after the manner of Victorian libraries. At one side was built the great fireplace, now cheerless and cold. There were rather many curtains that wavered when the wind blew. The wind was blowing now. We could feel it, damp and strange from the marsh, against our faces.

When I say that Vilas Hayward sat alone I do not mean that there were no other occupants in the room. There was one other, and it is true that at first I didn't see him at all. He kept at the very edge of the candlelight, and he moved so softly, so unobtrusively that it was very easy to ignore his presence. It was Ahmad Das.

A white face is always comparatively visible in the dim light. That is why soldiers going on to No Man's Land at night darkened their faces with lamp-black. But Ahmad's face was naturally dark, and it blurred in our sight. Sometimes I saw the whites of his eyes when the candlelight shone on them. Vilas Hayward was not trying to read; and the fact that the light was too dim for easy reading had nothing to do with it. He was watching Ahmad Das out of the corner of his eyes.

The lighting effect was one in which a great artist would have rejoiced. It was yellow and dim, of course; and perhaps it had a quality of unreality. The atmosphere of candles at any time is distinctly medieval. Then there was the gradation of shadows—dusky close to the fireplace, but shading off to a deep, intense black. The light from the two candles met at the very extremities, leaving a dusky path between. Vilas' head and shoulders cast a distinct shadow on the wall, blurred, however, by the effect of a candle across the room. The shadow thrown by Ahmad was something gliding and dusky and dim against the curtains of the windows.

There was an effect of silence, too, possibly induced by the accentuation of the faint sounds that were present. It seemed to me that I could hear distinctly the rustle and whisper of portieres dragged on the floor by the wind. A window shade wavered with the faintest stir of sound. Then there were the hushed, manifold sounds of the night that came hushed and strange through the noises—noises so obscure that the ears had to strain to perceive them.

Vilas' face was lighted by the nearest candle. I could really see it more plainly than any other detail in the room. The fact fascinated me at first. All other things were dim and blurred and unreal; but it was sharp and clear. And even this early in the drama it had a quality that was disturbing to the spirit. He had endured much these last three days.

"Good God! Where is every one?" he exploded at last. "Ahmad! Ahmad Das!"

The servant arose and came near him, half obscured in the shadows. He stood straight and tall.

"Yes, sahib—"

"Where is everybody? Southley and his son ought to be back by now. What direction have they gone?"

"I do not know, sahib. They told me they were going toward the cottages of the laborers. But they did not turn that way after they had gone out the door."

"And Miss Southley? She was to join me here."

"She has gone, too. I don't know where. The detectives are spending the day across the marsh—on the heights."

"But it's time they were back by now. Good Lord, what did they go there for, when the trouble is here? Here, I tell you, and you know it, too. Ahmad. You know it too devilish well."

"I do not know what the sahib means."

"Damn your black face!"

Then Vilas tried to regain his self-control. We saw him struggling. The fight was inscribed on his face. And it was a hard fight, too—a losing fight. For a long moment he was quiet, and Ahmad Das resumed his furniture dusting. He bent lower and

lower, and once more he was on his knees.

And now I didn't look at Vilas. My eyes were frozen upon Ahmad Das. His position, as far as externals were concerned, was one that every housekeeper gets in many a time a day. But there was something different about this. There was a luxury, a passion, in the way he spread his long body on the floor. I can't describe it except to say it was as if he felt a rapture in it. Nor was he calm any more. There was a strange nervousness upon him, like an intense eagerness, and his lips were drawn, ever so slightly. He crawled about so slowly, his body so close to the floor.

Then Vilas spoke again in the silence—the words sharp and clear. My eyes flashed to him. He was leaning forward in his chair, every muscle set, every tendon rigid.

"Ahmad Das!" he commanded. "Go and get some candles."

"I cannot, sahib," the Hindu answered from the floor. "They are all gone but these two. Every one. I can not bring more."

"Then I'm going out to look for Southley."

"He will be hard to find, sahib. There are shadows and water and jungle between." Then Ahmad's voice seemed to grow indescribably eager. "You will need a guide."

"A guide—what do you mean?"

"If the sahib goes, I will take him there. The sahib must not start out

in the dark alone! And if the sahib has despaired of Miss Southley meeting him here, and wishes to go to his room, I will go thence with him, too."
(TO BE CONTINUED)

Class Has Picnic

The young men's class of the Christian church enjoyed a picnic at Midway park Tuesday evening. Friends of the class members attended. Games and contests preceded a picnic supper served at 6:30 o'clock. An informal program was held following the supper.

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