

THE TIGER TRAIL

by Edison Marshall Illustrations by PAUL FREHM

CHAPTER I

Tampa is always quiet in mid-afternoon. It is always a tranquil time of day, and the best way to spend it is to sit and drink many cold drinks of lime and lemon.

I used to spend it that way except when cut on calls. Jefferson Davis Lincoln, who watches over me and answers my bells and sweeps my office and with inimitable bows guides my patients to their chairs, can make as refreshing a concoction out of a little lime-juice and mint and seltzer-water as can be imagined.

Perhaps the story of Southley Downs should begin with that August afternoon beside Uscappa Island. Alexander Pierce and I were tarpon fishing.

When I think of Alexander Pierce it is always with a fishingrod in his hand. He was at his best then. To see him on the street one could easily guess that he was a fisherman, but never a detective. There is no practice in the world that leaves its mark upon a man's face more clearly than fishing. Pierce had that mark. He had singularly quiet eyes—eyes that looked farther than most telescopes, but yet not seemingly keen or alert. He had a lean, weather-beaten face, scribed and rescribed with lines. His hair was curiously thin—and people rather expected it to be gray. But when he removed his hat it was seen to be rather light brown and fine.

"So you go back to your work tomorrow," I said. "I'm sorry you can't stay longer."

"Not as sorry as I am, doc," he replied. "If it's between fish and thieves, I choose fish every time. They are more gentlemanly, and require a finer art. One's daily bread, you know! But why don't you stay and fish without me?"

"Fishing for tarpon with anybody except Alexander the Great would give me no thrill at all," I told him. "I'd sooner go to my house party."

"Dancing around in a ballroom when you could be dancing around on the sea with a tarpon! By the way, where did you say you were going for this riotous week?"

"To a big old manor house in the interior—Southley Downs."

"Southley!" he muttered. "His name doesn't happen to be Peter Southley, does it?"

"That happens to be his name." "An old man—seventy-five years of age—white-haired, heavily built, about as tall as you, with a peculiar nervous twitch to his eyes?"

"That's Peter Southley. I don't know him well. I met him at my club in Tampa when he was visiting the Martins. And I can't understand what made him ask me. I got the letter just a couple of days ago, and he promises fishing and shooting and golf of the best. Asked me for a full week, and even seemed a trifle hectic about it—as if he wanted me very badly. I'll stay a day or two, at least."

"Queer thing," he muttered. "Such a queer thing. But there doesn't seem to be any further doubt." I was scorched by curiosity; but I knew enough not to ask questions.

"You're a sort of a trustworthy quack, Long," he remarked at last. I began to be hopeful; but I knew my cue.

"Very blundering, I'm afraid, Alex."

"Of course your years are against you—only thirty-three. Yet they say that you have a cool hand with a scalpel. Steady hand means steady nerves. Steady nerves means you're to be trusted in a pinch. You handled that Wildmarsh problem pretty well, too. Tell me—have you any deep, personal regard for this man Southley?"

"Not really." I'd barely met the man. "I did think he was a kindly old chap; very agreeable, and with a fine taste for vintages."

"I rather thought that might describe him. Long, I want you to keep your eyes open when you are at his house. I want you to watch—all the time."

"Alexander, you are the last man in the world to ask me to do anything that is the slightest breach in loyalty between a guest and his host."

"I rather hope I am, Long—yet a detective gets remorseless. I must guard against it. I should say it was quite otherwise. Maybe you don't know what I mean. I'm not sure that I know myself. I have rather vague ideas—instincts, I guess you'd call them. I can't tell you what prompts them. I don't know myself. Anyway, you can be sure that I don't want you to take any position unbecoming a guest."

"Then tell me—what am I to do?" He went on as if I hadn't questioned him. "Perhaps I'm playing a blind lead; but my instincts tell me otherwise. It is simply this: Less than a year ago the detective agency with which I have official connections have paid me the biggest fee of my lifetime to find this same Peter H. Southley. Only his name isn't that, or anything like it. It is, in reality, Andrew Lason."

"You mean—that the old man is going under an alias?" "I'll correct that a little. I don't know that his real name is Andrew Lason. I don't know that it isn't Southley. Names don't much matter, you know. At sundry times I've been known through the West as Amos Schmidt. His real name may be Southley, and it may be Lason, and it may be something else. All I know is for a long period of time the man who calls himself Southley was known as Andrew Lason. I know that he landed in

America forty years ago as Andrew Lason. What his name was before that, I don't know. I know that about a year ago inquiries came from a certain man in England to find at all costs Andrew Lason. The fee was to be tremendous, most of which was to be paid a year after we found him. The man's name was Roderick—at least, that's what he told us. His signature was that of an old man. After a while his son—a big, dark, good-looking man about thirty-five—came to see us personally. Well, we started to work. We traced just long enough to discover that Andrew Lason had moved South from New York as Peter H. Southley—when Roderick called us off. He said he'd found his party himself."

"Perhaps it was just some legal mix-up—heir to an estate, or something? Southley is tremendously wealthy."

"Possibly. But I did get interested. I never saw such a tireless pair of hunters as these Rodericks were. And when you're down for this week-end party I want you to keep ears and eyes wide open—and, of course, lips closed."

The journey to Southley Downs is distinguished by some of the most beautiful scenery in Florida, but I didn't look at it.

The porter showed me my seat at the seaboard station, and it is unbelievably true that ten minutes had passed before I ever noticed the dainty little hat on a girl almost the length of the car ahead. And it is a queer thing that my first thought after noticing it was that ten minutes had been wasted. There is no accounting for the vagaries of the human mind. It wasn't that I'm the kind of man that can stand before a shop window and spend an enjoyable ten minutes gazing at creations of millinery.

There was a feeling from the first that if it should only be lifted off it would reveal a great lovely heap of shimmering brown hair, arching a face as pretty and piquant as the eyes of a man could wish to see. It was just that kind of a hat.

The train stopped at a station, and a man in the opposite row of seats from mine left the train. His chair was considerably nearer the front of the car than mine, so I slipped into it. The girl's profile was plainly visible to me now.

She wore a little tailored suit of blue, and her silken bag indicated a week-end visit with a girl friend on the shore. It was one of those pretty conceits that girls love, cut up into a hundred delectable packets for toilet articles. I could not watch her so intently now. I pretended to gaze out of the window, but the panorama slipped by me without leaving a single impression in my memory. Then, turning once more, our eyes met.

All at once I saw that her color was gone. I watched her more intently. The fatigue of the journey, combined with some nervous strain that I could not understand, were having an actual, tangible effect on her physical being. I began to feel glad that I was a doctor. Her position had changed, too. I had to look twice to see what she was doing.

She no longer stared at the back of the seat. She was sitting upright, almost rigid in her chair, and her eyes were on the landscape outside the window. I followed their line of sight, and saw at once that we were passing through some great country estate. An enormous house, a great white palatial structure of style of long ago, perched upon a near-by hill. It looked as big as the castles of Europe, and on the hillside were clustered such outbuildings as stables and garages.

There were wide sweeps of meadow, a curving driveway, and in the most astounding contrast the deep fastnesses of tropical jungle. For we were in the interior of southern Florida, as verdant a place as is to be found in all of North America. Human senses are not entirely reliable. On the witness stand I could not swear exactly what I saw. As if caught in the frozen fascination with which the girl watched the passing panorama, I was still following the line of her vision. It seemed to me that I caught a glimpse of something yellow in the thicket—a curious brilliant yellow in great splashes of color. It was just a glimpse, and yet I had dim reasons for thinking that the yellow form was living.

It might have been just a gayly colored plant, or a flash of bird wings, or even a tawny dog. I should say that its size might correspond to that of an enormous hound. It might have been a yellow calf, or perhaps only the sunlight against dark water. It didn't matter anyway. The only thing that did matter, or that I remembered for hours afterward, was that the girl suddenly slipped down to the floor in a dead faint.

In an instant she was in my arms. I don't remember how she came there. I have no remembrance of exertion in leaping to her chair or picking her up. She was simply there when I again looked into her face, her slender body against my breast, her head resting on the muscle of my left arm, her white face uplifted, and unconscious upon her.

If I had a single impression as I carried her to the women's room, it was certainly not of her weight. She seemed to have no weight at all. But I did see the lovely shadow of her eyelashes made against the whiteness of her face.

A woman picked up the silken week-end bag that the unconscious girl had carried, and drew the curtain for me. She was a large, cheery-faced matron, capable and determined, and under ordinary circumstances I would have felt perfectly safe in leaving my patient in her hands. But in this case, I went to work to effect the recovery myself.

It was the most simple form of ordinary faint; so I sent the woman for smelling salts.

"Maybe she's got some in her bag," she suggested. I peered into the pretty conceit that the woman had brought, but I found no perfumed salts. It was a far different thing that met my eyes. I like to think that my face gave no inkling of the little shiver of wonderment that went through every nerve.

What I saw would not have been unusual under different circumstances. In the bottom of a trunk, or pushed into the cushions of an automobile seat, or even in a suit case, perhaps I would not have glanced twice at it. But in this bag, with the most intimate articles for daily use, it seemed incongruous to a horrible degree.

It was a dark, ugly automatic pistol, brand-new and with a full magazine of cartridges.

Revolving the unconscious girl was the work of a moment. But it almost made me miss my station. Her eyes opened and rested upon

me. I do not know with what white magic that glance was instilled. But it went deep into me, and left a curious warmth and elation. I know that no other eyes had ever looked at me in quite that way, or had the same effect upon me. Perhaps it was their curious darkness, or even the haunting sorrow that could not possibly be denied.

(Continued next week.)

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Spoke her name—it was Lenore;

Ah, she was a scrumptious creature, Glib of tongue and fair of feature, But, alas! I couldn't teach her For she had been there before— And she winked at me and murmured, Murmured the one word: "Encore!" Only that—and nothing more.

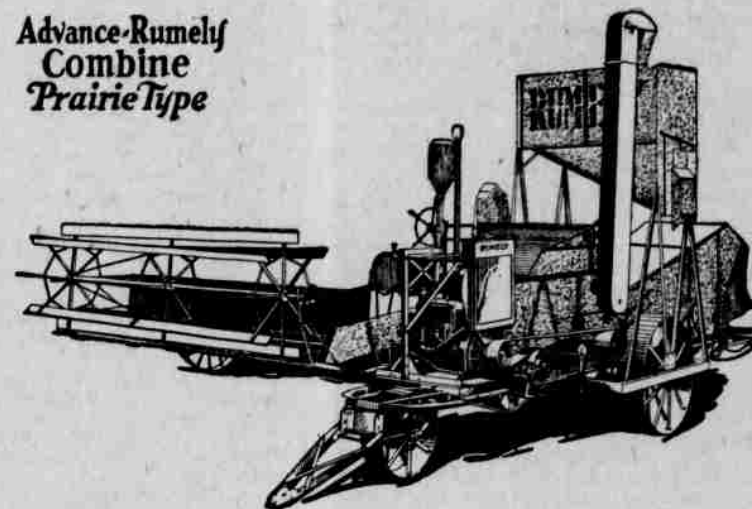
"Pinch me if I fall asleep," muttered the Stewed Stude as he lurched against the lamp post, and the

Proud Minion of the law proceeded to do as he was bid.

Mrs. de Style: "I suppose your daughter is to have her coming out ball very soon, isn't she?" Mrs. Rose Quycyk: "Oh, dear no! My daughter has another year at school before becoming a dilittante, and will not make her debris until next season."

"It stands to reason," said the wit, as the first debator arose.

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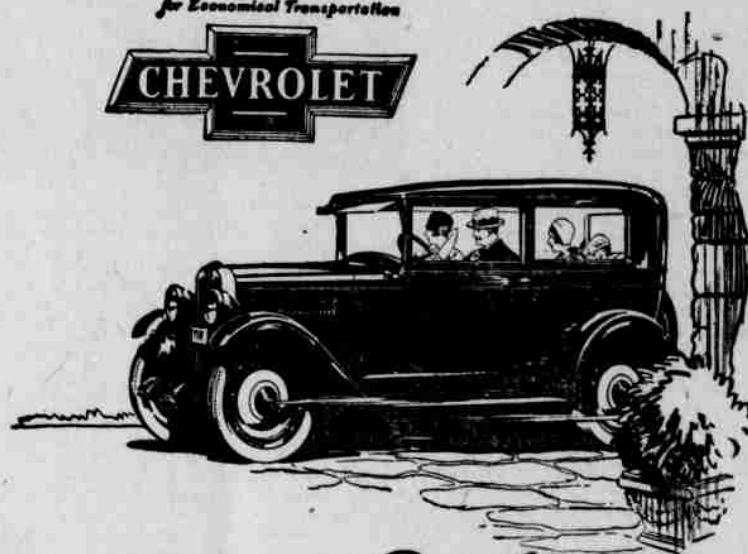
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