

THE TIGER TRAIL

by Edison Marshall Illustrations by PAUL FREHM



WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE

Dr. Long is visiting Southley Downs, to which he is conducted by Ahmad Das, an Oriental. There he meets Mr. Southley, whom a detective friend, Alexander Pierce, had told him to watch, and his son Ernest Southley. Mr. Hayward and his son Vilas and then Josephine Southley, whom he had seen faint 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.

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

The coroner and police arrive in order to investigate.

Because of the murder, Dr. Long must remain at Southley Downs. All the persons there are questioned by Inspector Freeman.

Dr. Long becomes jealous of the love he believes to exist between Vilas Hayward and Josephine. During the course of investigations of the crime Dr. Long becomes suspicious of a man named Robin. He determines to watch him.

Robin turns out to be Alexander Pierce, the detective.

Josephine Southley begins to show some warmth toward Dr. Long during the course of the investigations of the murder. In the library, Dr. Long meets Vilas Hayward. Robin watches the Oriental Ahmad Das, who is half-obscured in the dim light.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY.

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 waved 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's 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 height."

"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 external features were concerned, was one that every housekeeper gets in many times 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."

Vilas Hayward suddenly snatched open the drawer in the table. For an instant his frenzied hands thrust at its interior; then he whirled toward Ahmad.

"Where's my pistol?" he cried. "It was in the drawer."

"Perhaps one of the detectives

borrowed it for the hunt today."

Again Vilas flung into his chair. Again Ahmad went back to his dusting. His motions seemed to grow more sinuous, more silent. And now I looked in vain for the cloth. He seemed to have dropped it.

"Does the sahib wish to go look for Sahib Southley?" he asked. "If he does, I will be glad to go with him."

To me the words seemed charged with some terrible kind of passion. The effect that they had on Vilas was not pleasant to see. The manhood seemed simply to go out of him. His lips were loose, his eyes protruded, shaking hands reached for the chair-arms.

"No, you devil!" he cried, his voice rising. "You won't get me out there, where you got my father."

"Sahib!"

"And I order you to get off the floor. You're not working now. Get up, or I'll kill you where you lie!"

Ahmad Das got up. He rose very softly to his full height. He tiptoed across the room. And he blew out the light on the little stand.

The shadows deepened. There was only one candle now, the one that burned on the table. And I heard a soft, whispered sigh from Alexander.

"The man's a devil," he breathed in my ear. "Vilas called him by the right words."

"Then get up and save him," I answered. "Do you want to see Vilas murdered before our eyes?"

"Hush—and watch."

We watched. A long time there was silence. Ahmad Das stood still beside the extinguished candle.

"What are you going to do?"

"Do, sahib?" The answer came at last, trembling with some unearthly kind of passion. "It is not well to be imprudent with candles. The detectives might need a brighter light when they return to see what remains here."

Vilas tried to meet the snake's eyes. "What do you mean?" he whispered.

"They will come back soon, and want to talk to their guest. One of their guests is gone—you know where. Yesterday they bore him across the water. You only remain, and you are very dear to them, Sahib Strumburg."

Vilas leaned forward. "Strumburg? How dare you call me that? My name's Hayward—" "Once Strumburg—then Roderick—then Hayward—what does it matter, sahib? Names die when their bearers die."

"But I'm not Strumburg. I tell you I'm not—" "I will remember, sahib, that you told me that. But consider again, and see if you don't want to make me another answer."

"I'll never admit it."

"I will go from you for a minute, sahib—just a minute into the darkness—and then I will return. And there might be other things for you to tell me, too, when I come into your presence a moment from now. You really had no proofs that Sahib Southley is wanted in prison."

"But I have! You can't scare me out of it."

"Both things you can answer when I return to the sahib's presence. It will be just a little moment—"

Vilas half rose in his seat, ordering the servant to relight the candle. But Ahmad didn't obey. Rather he faded. The shadows hid him, and darkness closed round him.

Yet it wasn't as if he had completely gone. I knew that he was waiting somewhere in the darkness just beyond—perhaps behind the curtains, possibly in the hall. I didn't hear or see him. I simply knew he was there, and in a moment more would come back into the light for the answer to his questions. A long moment passed away. The house was tense and still. And once more I looked at Vilas Hayward.

He had his head turned over his shoulder, and he was watching with fascinated horror something that approached him in the darkness. I couldn't see what it was at first.

(Continued next week.)

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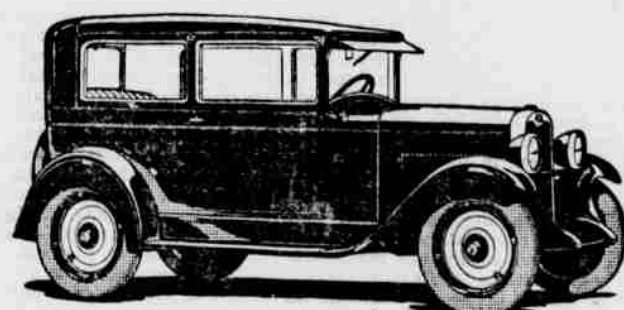
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