

THE TIGER TRAIL

by Edison Marshall

Illustrations by PAUL FREINA



"I'll tell you, Ahmad," he cried. "I'll tell you all. I'm Strumburg, just as you said, and a fugitive from justice, too. And I haven't anything against Southley. Even my father couldn't have proved his claim in a test, and he's dead. Let me go, Ahmad! Don't raise your talons against me."

The wild flow of words died away, and for an instant the form in the shadow halted. Then it moved slowly forward again.

"I tell you I'll go away, and never return again. We never had any real proofs, Ahmad! Let me go! And at that instant I felt Alexander's breath against my ear. "You heard, didn't you, Long?" he whispered.

"Yes—"
"Then the work's done."
I felt the stir as his arm reached up to the electric switch on the wall. He pressed it. Unknown to me the wrecked lighting plant had been repaired. All the great chandeliers of the library flashed on at once.

The first impression was blindness. But as my eyes became adjusted to the sudden glare, I knew at least part of the truth at last. The form of the tiger had been most real and convincing at the edge of the dim and ineffective candlelight. But it was no more terrible than the counterfeit giraffes that the clowns parade in a circus ring, when the glare from the chandeliers came down. Before us, stripped of all delusion, Ahmad Das rested on his hands and feet on the floor. He held his body low, his legs almost straight, to give the effect of length. Over him, in a rather ingenious way, was thrown a great, tawny tiger skin. The four legs were fastened with some simple device to his ankles and wrists, and the great head, filled out with some light substance, rested on his shoulders. I leaped and seized Alexander's shoulders.

"Good Heavens!" I yelled in his ear. "That's only part of it. That insane hoax couldn't have broken Hayward's neck!"

But Alexander wriggled out of my grasp. "Of course it didn't break Hayward's neck," he said. "The real murderer of Hayward slipped one over on us—improvised some business that wasn't written in the play. I've got the real murderer of Hayward, dead, down in the boat."

Alexander Pierce spent most of the rest of the evening answering questions. There were more things to find out than ever I thought I could possibly learn.

First, he took us down to the boat beside the water, and lifted the tarpaulin that covered the thing in the bottom. A dead animal lay therein—a creature large as the largest hound, yellow, with spots of black. It was a powerful animal, long-clawed and white-fanged; and my breath stopped at the sight of it. "A tiger?" I demanded.

"Tiger, nothing!" Alexander answered. "You ought to be enough of a naturalist to know that a tiger has stripes. This beast has spots. He weighs two hundred pounds, and a tiger twice as much. Besides, you don't find tigers in Southern Florida. It's plain to me, old Doc Long, that you don't know the history of Florida very well."

"Evidently I don't. I don't remember reading about such a creature as this—"

"Please speak respectfully of him. I'd have much preferred to have left him alive, but we'll need him for proof of that wild story we have to tell the coroner's jury tomorrow afternoon. If you remember, there was a time when Southern Florida was still the home of the jaguars—the greatest of American felines."

I remembered that I had heard something about it. "Most of them were exterminated a good many years ago. You can still find 'em in a few remote regions of Southern Texas. I supposed myself that they were all gone here—even in such a wild part of the State as this. Long, you see here what is probably the last of the Florida jaguars—a creature as heavy as a leopard, and one of the strongest jawed and shouldered felines in the world."

"And since you won't rest till I tell you the rest of it, I might as well say that this big cat was the base on which Ahmad and Southley worked out their plot. They knew about this jaguar."

"When Hayward and his son bore down upon them here—after tracing them all the way from England—Southley and Ahmad saw a chance to take advantage of this big, tawny creature in the swamp. I suppose you know by now what the Haywards were."

"Blackmailers, of course," I answered.

Alexander grinned his teeth. "You've taken plenty long to guess it, but you're right at last. Their real name is Strumburg. They are crooks themselves. The elder Strumburg was a confederate in crime in Southley's own youth. I use the word guardedly, Long, and I think it is true. I haven't any doubt but that Southley's early life wouldn't bear investigation. But that doesn't matter now. It's a joy, my boy, to come to the aid of one who has come to his own aid. Southley rose above that other life. I think that he escaped after a particularly reckless crime. It wasn't a crime that befitted him financially, he says; but yet the hue and cry that was raised scared him from his criminal ways. A man was shot, and though there were extenuating circumstances, he cer-

tainly would have gone to prison for twenty years at least, according to the way men were sentenced in those days. First he went to India and Africa, and made his fortune. Then he came to America, as Andrew Lasso. And all the time he lived in deadly fear that the long arm of the British law would reach out for him.

"Then the elder Strumburg found him out. He adopted the name of Roderick, and sent out inquiries for this Andrew Lasso. He offered a huge reward to be paid a year after we found him, and of course Lasso—or Southley as we call him now—was to pay the reward. He came here at last, with his vicious son, and the work of blackmail began. They told old Southley—in the gray twilight of his days—what to expect in case he didn't come through with their demands.

"They said they had proofs that would put him back in prison. The terror of his long years came back as never before, and he didn't have the strength and judgment to fight it any longer. Old age was upon him. He gave way, again and again. And even today he wouldn't be free if it hadn't been for the real hero of Southley Downs—his servant Ahmad Das.

"Ahmad Das is a mystic. Long, you're a doctor, and you don't believe in prenatal influence. You say it's all bunk. Yet it is true that Ahmad Das's mother was attacked by a tiger, that the creature died when Ahmad Das was born—and it is true that Ahmad has the most remarkable, natural, catlike grace of any man I ever saw. Of course he just pretended the rest—his propensities toward creeping around on his hands and knees. It all lent toward the effect. He's a mystic, I tell you—perhaps a believer in the theory of reincarnation of souls; and that dark, oriental mind of his conceived an idea that I don't think most Anglo-Saxons would have ever thought of.

"He knew he couldn't kill the Haywards. That was murder, and would defeat their own aims in that it might draw attention to the past life of Southley. He knew that Southley couldn't satiate their rapacious appetites. They would cling and suck till the last cent was gone. Southley bought those clothes—paid for their cars. Other things were planned for this winter. So Ahmad Das conceived of the desperate scheme of scaring the Strumburgs—or Haywards as they called themselves—from the estate by means of the tiger legend.

"Ahmad Das had all the material in the world to work with. He knew it when he thought out the plan. This jaguar—a tawny streak in the mud—was, of course, his greatest card. His own natural feline grace and Hayward's naturally superstitious nature were cards too. Wicked men usually are superstitious. Of course Ahmad couldn't get the jaguar into the house, but it was a simple matter to rig up that tiger skin. Every day he put a piece of meat out on a certain flat rock on the hillside. It wasn't human blood and flesh you saw there. It was good red beef; and Ahmad Das got blood stains on his shirt carrying it down there. And it wasn't any time at all until they got that big cat so that he stayed around the jungle at the base of the hill. The inside work couldn't be done in bright light, so it was necessary to pretend that the lightning plant was broken. The faint light of candles gave just the proper atmosphere.

"I'm crazy about the whole scheme, Long. It worked out to perfection except for one thing. Nobody had counted on the jaguar killing Hayward."

"What were you doing with that shirt—and the beef blood?" "Simply making the necessary tests—to prove my story to the jury tomorrow. If I hadn't Freeman would have had poor Ahmad—the most faithful soul in the world—convicted and hung for murder

by now—mentally, at least." "And, lastly, how did you come to be involved in this affair at all? Did you come just because I sent for you?"

"I'm a private detective, Long," was his quiet answer. "I don't work for the State, although the State employs me sometimes. Southley himself wrote for me to come—to help him out. I told him I couldn't at first—that was some weeks ago—but I knew a young man that would be of the greatest assistance to him in the hour of need. That young man had been in two or three bad messes before—the affair at Wildmarsh, and the story of the cobra curse, and the Mole. Southley had met the young man in a visit in Tampa, and he liked him. So the next day this young chap—what a bone-head he has been—got a letter from Southley asking him down for a week's shooting, fishing, and rest. He was a doctor, and his name was Long."

Vilas left on the night train. He packed his bag in silence, and was rowed over to the railroad track whence he could go to the station. When midnight hung still and mysterious over the water world, Josephine and I found ourselves alone on the great veranda.

"Let's walk down to the water's edge," she suggested. "It's drying up so quickly. It will be gone in a few days more."

"And I will be gone, too," I told her.

She walked in front of me, down the narrow path. And I was struggling for words that wouldn't come. "Did you know, Miss Southley, that Alexander was responsible for my invitation here?" I asked her at last.

She did not even turn her head. "I found it out tonight."

"Do you see what that means? That I was sent here to serve. And all I did was make mistakes. They started on the day we met—when I let you go without providing means of ever seeing you again," I went on. "Fate protected me then. I wonder if I can ask it to protect me now—after all the other mistakes I've made. And the worst of them all—the ones that hurt most—are the things that I said and thought of you."

Her voice was scarcely more than a whisper when she answered me. "They hurt me, too."

"They showed me up as the poorer clay," I told her sadly. "They exposed me—a doubting and suspicious man, and a blind man. One who is unable to believe in his finer instincts. Of course, I see now why you brought the pistol in your vanity bag. Tell me, Josephine! It was for no other reason than to protect yourself from Vilas Hayward, if worse came to worst?"

"I don't believe you are done doubting yet, or you wouldn't ask," she said. "That was just part of the reason, Dr. Long. The other was that I was so afraid—so afraid, all the time."

"You were with Vilas always as part of the blackmail your father paid. You were part of the price of silence, and you submitted because you realized something of the power that the Haywards held over your father. What your father told the detective—that you were to be Vilas's wife—was from compulsion, not from choice."

She nodded.

"And for the same reason you couldn't come to my defense that night in the den—when I had struck Vilas. And the reason that you told the detective of my quarrel with Hayward that day as I was leaving was not that you were afraid Vilas would be implicated, but why was it, Josephine?"

"I don't think you should ask me that. You've thought ill of me—so many times. The reason was—"

"Yes."

"That I wanted you to stay, Dr. Long!"

We were silent a long time. And all the while I was searching about in a mind suddenly gone empty for the words I wanted to say. They

simply wouldn't come.

And then I became aware of something rapturous past words to tell. Something was stealing along my arm, so light that I could hardly feel it through my coat sleeve, and finally it nestled at the hollow of my elbow. And then I found myself whirling, and speaking breathless words.

"You'll forgive me, Josephine—all those things I said—and did?" I pleaded. "Oh, sweetheart—" And no mortal eyes could believe the change in her that came when I spoke these words. It was one of the miracles of these latter days. At first she simply waited—as if for me to continue. And then, after a while, she made me an answer. Part of it was just words. Part was the look that the moonlight showed on her face. But what was by a thousand times the biggest part, the part no human being could have been hopeful enough to believe, was a thing that her arms did. And then—

What happened then is a secret between us and the marshes; and the marshes are famous for not telling their secrets. One of their secrets is a ring that Vilas had given Josephine; and it lies in the mud of their bottom today. After a while a great owl hooted and called from the island, hoping to repeat his triumph of a few nights before. But Josephine turned her face just long enough to laugh at him.

THE END.

New Assistant: "Gentleman asks if this fannel shirt will shrink." Proprietor: "Does it fit him?" "No, it's too large." "Yes, of course it shrinks."

"What does your father do?" "Nothing." "And you?" "I take after my father."

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