

# THE TIGER TRAIL

by Edison Marshall

Illustrations by PAUL FREEMAN



**WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE**  
Dr. Long out fishing with Alexander Pierce, a detective, tells of his projected trip to Southley 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. Now read on—

### Chapter II

I heard the conductor shout behind me. I turned from her, even as her eyes were upon me. It was my station and I did not stop to realize the screaming folly of leaving the train.

Men who have thrown away the wrong card in the biggest poker hand of their lives might have some inkling of the way I felt. For three minutes I stood fuming, watching the vanishing end of the train. It soon swept out of sight.

"Is this Dr. Long?" spoke a voice behind me.

The voice was deferential; yet it had neither the tone nor the rhythm of our Florida colored men. I think that I expected to turn and see a white servant—one of those gray-haired English butlers of an old and incomparable school. It was a low voice, with a rather peculiar purring quality. And so I was surprised to see that dusky face that looked into mine. It was black, yet quite dark enough to be that of a mulatto. But in a glance I knew that the man had no African blood whatever.

The shape of his features was distinctly Aryan. He had a straight, finely chiseled nose that was almost classical, thin lips and rather high cheek-bones. He wore the snow-white turban of a Mussulman. But most of all I noticed his eyes. They were the eyes of a mystic, very black and astoundingly deep. They gave no key to his thoughts, but suggested the somber mysticism of the East. Of course he was one of the Southley's servants, and a native of Hindustan.

"Yes, I'm Long," I told him.

"I come from Southley Downs, sahib—and the car is waiting," he went on in his strange, purring voice. The great, black eyes fascinated me.

He took my bag and led the way to the car. I am not usually particularly observant of the casual astudying the dark, straight form in front of me. There was a quality in his carriage that was particularly absorbing. I couldn't quite grasp what it was. I rather think it was the somewhat stealthy way with which he placed his feet, a sinuousness and a grace that one might expect in a dancer. I couldn't hear his footfall on the gravel; and I fell to conjecturing what a successful hunter he would be in the Western mountains. It usually takes years of practice to learn to stalk. He seemed to know how intuitively. The man walked just like a cat. He placed his feet the same way.

"The other must have missed the train," he told me in his correct but hesitant English, as he helped me in Southley's great touring car.

Southley himself met me on the great veranda. The shadows were heavy there, and his face just a white blur. But when we went into the lighted hall, I saw that the months had changed him. The sight of his fine, old face in the candle-light was, I think, the first real shock of my stay at Southley Downs.

He greeted me with the finest hospitality. He couldn't live in a Southern manor house and do any other thing. It's in the air and the atmosphere, as all men know who have visited the South. It is a tradition, too. The voice itself was rather wavering and shrill, rather more aged than I remembered it. Then he turned to the impassive Oriental behind him.

"Ahmad Das," he asked, "didn't Joe come?"

I didn't hear the answer, for I turned to shake hands with a tall, straight youth that was Southley's son. He was about twenty-one evidently an undergraduate at college.

"My son Ernest," the old man told me. He tried to straighten up. "Already taller than his father."

We walked into the great drawing-room; and there two other men arose to greet us.

"Mr. Hayward," my host explained. "And another Mr. Hayward, his son."

It was wholly possible that his voice changed slightly when he introduced these two. But, of course, it was to be expected. An instant before he had just introduced his son, evidently the joy and pride of his life. But now it seemed to me that the voice had a tone—a strain and a nervousness that was not readily explained. I bowed over the other man's hand.

He was a huge creature—six feet tall and more than a little obese, and perhaps sixty-five years of age. He was closely shaven and his white hair was clipped close. He had rather peculiar, piercing gray eyes, a firm mouth, and he had the look of overflowing opulence. As I shook his hand, a bell jingled in the hall. For an instant the Hindu's face showed in the doorway, and Southley went to meet him. They talked together an instant, and the old man was beside me again by the time I turned to the younger Hayward.

He was a man possibly my own age. He also was in the newest of dinner garb. He had a rather large, dark face—perhaps a trifle severe and forbidding. There was a dull light that might have been ambition and might have been a thousand other things in his eyes.

"I've heard Southley speak of you," the younger man told me. "I am Silas Hayward. It may help you keep us straight to know my given name."

"I think that is Joe now." Then we all stood up. The whole world faded—the glittering table, the watchful faces of the men, the dark body of the Hindu servant—and left only the slender form at the threshold of the door.

"She's been on a visit to the shore, and she was carried past her station—like the little stupid thing she is," I heard Southley saying from far away. "I had to send for her in my car. Josephine—come up and meet my friend, Doctor Long. Long—my daughter, Miss Southley."

The girl at the doorway was the same girl I had carried in my arms that afternoon; and she had not yet removed the intriguing little hat from the fine brown hair.

"I hope you don't mind candle-light," apologized Southley during the excellent meal. "We have a private lighting plant, but it's seriously out of order. We're sending for new parts."

"I prefer candles, and I'd have 'em if I had enough servants to keep them trimmed," I replied. "It's the most restful light on earth."

Then the elder Hayward grunted in his place.

"I fall all over the house with 'em," he said. "I like bright lights, and lots of 'em. And the worst of it is the plant broke three days after I came. Spite work, I think."

I looked at him, expecting to find him in jest. There are men that joke like that sometimes. But his face gave no sign. And I was to learn before the night was done that such remarks were quite to be expected from the elder Hayward.

A long, tremulous call suddenly shivered out of the darkness—seemingly just below the veranda. It was a plaintive, haunting cry, but except to a naturalist not worth a moment's thought. I had been enough in the wilderness to recognize it as the cry of a certain large species of owl—a night-hunter that is often found in our Florida marshes. Those on the veranda with me must have heard the same sound dozens of times. But four of them started in their chairs, and one of the four uttered a half-smothered gasp of dismay.

Something was radically wrong with the nerves of these occupants of Southley Downs. Evidently the swamp air had got into them and left its poison. The elderly Southley had evidently not heard the sound. At least, he gave no sign. His son, the nerves of whose handsome body should have been of steel, gave a scarcely perceptible start. Both of the Haywards turned with a nervous jerk, and the elder said something that sounded like an oath under his breath. Josephine had been the most affected of all; and when I looked at her again I saw that lingering, haunting sorrow in her dark eyes.

She uttered a little, nervous laugh—a sound that was joyously musical in spite of her embarrassment.

"Did you ever encounter just this atmosphere before?" she asked me. "It's these marshes, I think—the traditions of this old house."

"All it needs is a ghost," I told her. "If you can present a ghost, it's going to be the biggest week of my life."

"It's here already."

"You don't mean it?"

"The newest, most novel ghost in the world!"

She said it lightly; and I kept my eyes upon her. Then we heard the elder Hayward grunting from his chair.

"Oh, don't tell that silly story again, Josephine," he muttered. "I've heard it till I'm tired."

Then take him into the library, Joe," her father suggested. "I do want him to hear it—and since it bores Mr. Hayward, you'd better not tell it here. I want him to see the house, anyway."

Josephine and I went through the long hall, and into the library. There

were other candles here, and the shadows were long and unflattering. I held a chair for her, and took one myself.

"Of course I know you," she said at once.

"I'm glad of that. I was sure you had forgotten."

I was watching with immeasurable delight every change of expression in her face, every shadow in her eyes, the delicious rising and falling of the color in her cheeks. She was in the middle of a sentence, and all things else were forgotten. Then, slowly as water freezes, the life utterly died in her face.

There is no other word. In a moment, the witchery and mystery that men call life was sparkling in her eyes and dancing in her smile. Her color was at its height, and I was drinking it like wine. In the next it was wholly gone. Probably my first impression was that her color was fading.

She was watching something just over my shoulder. Her gaze was almost trance-like. The light went out of her eyes, and they widened, too. And a no less perceptible change came in the set of her lips.

Very slowly I turned. I don't know what I expected to see. But I certainly expected nothing as commonplace as I saw. Her eyes were fixed on the form of Ahmad Das, the servant, who was doing some household task at the end of the long room.

For an instant I also followed his motions with a senseless fascination. He was on his hands and feet on the rug, evidently cleaning a soiled place on the carpet. And even in that awkward position he seemed to move with a strange, feline grace, a lithe sinuousness beyond all words.

I did not forget that this was natural in the man. But by some Satanic contriving of fate and circumstance, his candle-light had found a reflection in his eyes. I am a cold-blooded, self-disciplined man, and it was not just imagination, not just delusion or moon-madness that revealed to me a strange, greenish glare, not unlike the light to be seen in the eyes of certain great beasts of prey in the black depths.

Ahmad Das left the room, and I spoke in the deadly quiet that followed his departure.

"What is it, Miss Southley?" I asked her as gently as I could, "What has frightened you?"

"I must be ill," she said. "It was just Ahmad Das."

"I know—and that wild light in his eyes was natural. It was just the glare from his candle."

She smiled at me, took me through some of the great, down-stairs rooms of the manor house. The place was almost Georgian. There were many little alcoves—the best of hiding-places—and long corridors and indefinite flight of stairs. I was amazed at the size of it.

"And what traditions it must have!" I exclaimed. "You forgot, Miss Southley. You were going to tell me about the ghost."

She paused and looked at me. I've decided I hadn't better.

"I'm so sorry. It would give an added zest to this visit—"

"But you wouldn't believe it—"

"And you wouldn't want me to! Ghost stories aren't meant to be believed."

"But this story is a little different, Dr. Long. It has one or two rather troublesome points—and it isn't to be laughed at, even if it isn't to be believed. I hope you'll be able to laugh—but I'm afraid you won't. It's been a tradition in this house since my father came, forty years ago. And it isn't nice—at all. It's just that Southley Downs needs a doctor—even more than I do."

"And maybe I'm the one it needs."

"Our ghost isn't the ghost of a man," she said. "It isn't the ghost of a lovely girl who died for a sweetheart—or even a little child."

"I'm glad it isn't a little child. I can't bear to think of their sleep being so uneasy that they would walk."

"Our ghost—isn't a human being at all."

I couldn't laugh into her earnest face. I didn't feel like laughing.

"It isn't very cheerful, is it, doctor?" she went on. "And it is rather embarrassing to sit here and tell you things I know you can't possibly believe. My father came from India forty years ago; and he brought a tiger-cub with him. It was a pet—a tawny little creature that played and romped and pulled at the curtains. He brought two servants, too—a Hindu man and my mother's ayah. Both these two servants are dead. Although you would hardly guess it, Ahmad Das was born after they came to this plantation."

"The cub grew into a beautiful, tawny, full-grown tiger, seemingly as gentle as a collie. But one night when the wind blew it seemed to go mad. It attacked the Hindu woman, and she was badly torn before my father drove the creature off. In the condi-

tion that she was, her wounds were even more dangerous than they otherwise would have been. It was unquestionably the brute's intention to carry her off—and maybe you know something about tigers."

"They say that they will play for literally hours with their human prey—just as a cat plays with a mouse, with the most terrible cruelty that can be imagined. The beast attacked my father then, and leaped through the window and escaped into the marshes."

"When morning came all the negroes and my father and the Hindu tracked the tiger down—and finally killed him in the thickets. And when they got back Ahmad Das was born. On the very day, and the same hour, that the tiger died."

"Of course that's just a detail. The legend that has grown up deals with the stories that the colored people told—about something they saw thereafter."

She paused, and in the little silence we heard some night birds give its sleepy call from the marsh.

"At first the stories were rather vague. Now and again they would get a glimpse of something tawny and alive in the thickets. Everybody laughed at first. But as time went on it got increasingly hard to laugh. Too many people told the same story. And one night, a traveler stopped at the house, simply speechless with fright. He said that a tiger, clear and tawny in the moonlight, had followed his horse."

"The stories all agreed on one point. The beast was always seen either on or about this hill on which the house is built. And then, one midnight, a negro came with a candle on some errand into the library, the room we are now in. He told rather a straight story afterward. He couldn't see at first. He just heard something bounding about in the shadows—playing with the curtains. His candle-light showed him something big as an enormous hound—and yellow and black in color."

"That is substantially the legend, Dr. Long. Of course I don't want you to think twice about it—if you do you would take your bag and go. For years and years the story was just told at intervals, and not even the negroes were afraid. But two years ago—But you've heard enough. Let's talk of something else."

"If I'm to cure this house of its troubles, you'd better tell me all." I told her.

She braced herself and continued. She was a sensible, cool-headed American girl; and I had no doubt but that the story was hard for her to tell. Already I was groping for some natural explanation for the legends.

"Two years ago Sam, one of our colored men, came wild-eyed into the house and said that he had seen the thing just below our veranda—and all of us laughed at him. Perhaps a month later one of the housemaids came with almost an identical story—she and one of the young colored men had been walking about the hillside, and it had suddenly emerged from the shrubbery. It makes such a story particularly disquieting, doctor, to have two people verify it."

(Continued next week)

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