THE TIGER TRAIL

by Edison Marshall — Illustrations by PAUL FREHM

WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE

Dr. Long, out fishing with Alex Pierce, a detective, tells of his projected trip to Southley Downs. Pierce advises him to keep his eyes wide open while there. On the train Dr. Long is attracted by a girl, who later turns out to be Hayward's daughter, and looking into her bag, is astonished to find a loaded revolver.

Dr. Long meets Armad Vilas, an Oriental, who conveys him to Southley Downs, where he meets Mr. Southley and his son Ernest Southley, Mr. Hayward and his son Vilas, and then describes Southley, who is the girl he met 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.

CHAPTER III

"My father and I—some of the servants went out—both Ernest and I were always at school. They couldn't see in the shadows—but my father says that beyond all chance of doubt some living creature bounded thru the thickets in front of them. It might have been a cat, or even a large dog.

"A few weeks ago the details began to vary. It was after my father's old friend, Mr. Hayward, and his son came to visit us. But I'll give this first. Would you say the younger Mr. Hayward would be troubled with faults, Dr. Long?"

"I saw him jump to-night when the owl hooted."

"Remember he has spent nearly a month in this house. After a month in it, you'll jump, too. I mean, under ordinary conditions, away from this atmosphere.

"I would especially say that Vilas Hayward had no reason to trouble him."

"Don't a few nights after his arrival Vilas Hayward came to you in some one with a curious look of question on his face. He said he had seen something."

Josephine's eyes were full and in the moon mist, and the sentence died away. The stone of the rest room was the kind to be hewned in remote deserts, not in the moonlit nights.

"Yes," I urged her.

"It isn't very pleasant," she warned.

"Doctor has the right to know all the symptoms."

"He said when he came through the long hall that leads from the drawing room something walked before him. It was in the shadows, and he couldn't not see it again. He asked us if we kept a great yellow and black cat, a hound as large, or larger, than a Great Dane."

The elder Hayward and I were strolling on the veranda, and a few minutes before our host had been with us. He had seemed into the house on some errand. Josephine was with us in the veranda, and his chair was drawn close to hers. At first I wasn't thinking about Hayward or Armad either. I was concerning with what astounding fortune Vilas and Josephine strangely seemed to be come together.

It was a baffling thing. I couldn't think of any conscious effort in that direction. Yet seemingly powers in the sky were always throwing them together. Hand instead of the two guests of Southley Downs would be on the veranda together in the next a group of us would have wandered off, and Vilas and Josephine would be alone.

I wondered how much of this curious development was engineered by Josephine herself. It wasn't particularly pleasant thing to think about. Of course, girls in this age have a right to play all their cards to win the love of a desirable man. It was all legitimate—all fair. But sometimes it seemed to me that she would have preferred to stay with the rest of us, but that some inscrutable power, mysterious and immutable, denied it. That power was either Josephine's aged father, the elder Hayward, or both.

Hayward and I were having a good night cigar together. My wrist watch indicated a few minutes after ten. And then Hayward saw a shadow waver in the moonlight of the golf green.

It was hard to see at first. Some living creature was advancing along the slope toward us—something that seemed dark and not very tall. We stood still and waited. There was nothing else to do.

Then all at once the creature's form seemed to change. I can't describe it except to say that upon one instant it appealed to me as being low and rather long, and on the next tall and narrow. The change was so abrupt that the creature seemed fairly to leap. Yet it easily could have been the effect of the moonlight or the shadows. It might have been simply a matter of perspective. At once we saw the advancing form that before had seemingly had the dimensions and outline of a huge dog was just the form of a man. But I had been enough in the mountains to know that the moon and the darkness and jungles play strange tricks on fancy and vision.

It was Armad Vilas. He was coming in from one of his long walks. Hayward grasped behind me, and as I moved back the back of our hands touched.

Hayward's left cold. Whatever had been fancy and wrong perspective before, this was the truth. His blood wasn't in his hands, as it should have been. Evidently it had all gone up to his brain, playing strange tricks with it.

Armad bowed to us as he passed.

"Good Lord!" Hayward breathed. "I wasn't looking for that wretch."

"He was just coming in from one of his walks."

"Those walks of his! Why don't Southley forbid 'em? I will if he don't. I'll be damned if I'll have him walking through those jungles and creeping up on us this way?"

"Creeping up on us?" I echoed. "What way?"

"Besides, what would a man want to walk around in those jungles for?" he went on, unheeding me. "Tell me that?" Then his voice changed—dropped tone by tone until it was almost a whisper. "And tell me this, too, Long—and tell me the truth."

"Yes."

"Did—did you see anything curious about—about Armad's posture as he came up the hill? Of course, it was probably just the moonlight—yet there was something puzzling about it."

"I'll confess I didn't recognize him at once."

"That isn't it. That isn't quite it, either. Oh, the devil! It's nonsense, anyway."

We walked up to the veranda and waited for an instant on the steps for a last look over the marsh. There was a ring around the moon that promised rain. We listened to the night birds and the noise of the insect world, like the strum of a banjo, insistently remote, above the dreary, gray wastes. Then Hayward touched my arm.

"If you'd go in, Long, and look at Armad's hands," he told me, "you'd find 'em with mud on 'em."

"Why, Mr. Hayward?"

"Because he was crawling up that hill—on his hands and feet!"

Then his face grew into a scowl and he entered the house.

I had a pipe by myself after he had gone. At first I thought about what he had said. But it didn't make particularly good sense. It was true that Hayward didn't like the Indian, yet this would have scarcely led to an accusation to be there. The stare with which Hayward's eyes followed him when the servant worked about the rooms was little short of deadly—I had observed it too many times to be mistaken. Orders he gave were always in the most insulting form. It seemed to me just an unjustified aversion, and the taste of the thing was open to question.

There was a tenseness, a breathlessness in the air. It was obviously the calm before one of these blinding, crashing Florida thunderstorms.

I thought I had better warn the occupants of the house. There might be windows to close, or other preparations. The library was empty, but I heard voices in the den that opened from it. And maybe it was a sign that already the atmosphere of Southley Downs has instilled its poison into my nerves that I did not remember to stop and knock. With the memory of that mysterious calm behind me, I hurried across the soft rug. The door opened softly beneath my touch.

The scene in the candle-light was like a tableau. The light was so yellow and soft, the shadows so startling black, the actors stood so motionless. With arms leaning upon the little mahogany table in the center of the den stood Vilas Hayward. There was a drunken look about him; yet I knew it was not from wine. His face was flushed, intent. With the table between them, as if for a shield, Josephine faced him.

"Don't come a step nearer," she said as the door opened.

Her face was white as the candle that burned between them, its lines were deep, and her dark eyes were smouldering. The little silken week-end bag I had seen on the train lay before her on the table, and her hand was lost in the lace of its mouth.

There were wild, primal passions at play in the room. One of them was lust; and one was the fury of murder. There is no use of mincing words. They were bared and unmasked before me.

Vilas turned to me with an oath. The girl slipped fainting to the floor. I answered him without restraint, and lifted the girl into my arms. I crossed with her to the little sofa at the side of the room where the two had evidently been sitting; then turned to meet the man. He had followed me across the room, and not six feet was between us.

"I think, Dr. Long," Vilas cried, "that you're altogether too officious. You'd better keep out of this."

I am not sure just what I answered him. But primal passions had wakened in me, too, and the words were straight. He leaped at me, and I met him with a blow.

He reeled, then caught at the table. And his hand reached for the silken bag on the table.

I knew that the girl was screaming. The sound rose above the noise of the storm. I leaped for him, but he whirled about the table before I could reach him. He tore the pistol from the bag. It glittered in his hand.

I had no delusions about what he would do with it. The drawn face, the smouldering eyes, told all too plainly. He was too far for me to leap at him. So I struck out the candle.

The dark fell over us. The sound of the storm obliterated his breathing. It was the truce of darkness—a truce remembered from primal days.

I don't know how long it had continued when Hayward and Southley came. Their forms suddenly appeared in the open door; and each of them carried candles.

Vilas still held the pistol, and it gleamed in the candlelight.

"Vilas!" his father called. "Put down that thing!"

He hastened about the table, and my aged host leaped to front of me. I tried to push him away; and his answer was a laugh—one grim syllable of laughter, ironical.

"He won't kill me!" he said. "I'm the goose—that lays the golden eggs. He won't kill me."

Vilas screamed at us. The mad madness was still on him.

"He struck me. He's got to apologize. He found me with Josephine, and he struck me as if I were a dog."

His father took the pistol from his hands, and put it in his pocket. Southley sighed a little, and placed his candle on the table. The girl rose up behind us, and I was amazed at her self-control. It had all come back.

"He struck me," Vilas said again and again. "What are you going to do about it, Southley? You've got just ten minutes to turn him out of this house—or else I'll go instead."

"Let's forget it—" the old man answered with utter weariness.

"Forget nothing, Southley!" he exclaimed. "We've got to get to the bottom of this. If my son was struck he's got to have satisfaction. I lived long enough on the continent to know that, and so has he. And so have you. It isn't the way it's done over there. If a man's struck the other pays."

"Your son is sufficiently able to take care of himself, I hope," I suggested.

"If he's taken care of himself, you'd be laying under this table now—with your blood spoiling a good Oriental rug," the older Hayward answered with startling malice. "I'm not sure but that he'd ought to have done it. I believe it's up to you, Long, to give a satisfactory explanation."

"I have nothing to explain." Then I turned my back upon him, and faced the broken figure that was my host. "Sir, if there is any explanation to be made it will have to come from your daughter."

It was a curious expression that came to the old man's face. Its lines seemed to grow slack. There was hopelessness in it, and the weakness of long years, and above all things else, hopeless, utter impotency.

It seemed to me that the girl opened her lips to speak. But before the words came, the elder Hayward had answered for him.

"What has this young pup to do with the relations between Josephine and my son?" he asked, querulously. "They have already been settled. If that is the issue, it only makes it more certain what course remains. They can't go on living here, guests in the same house, with this between them. Tell him, Southley, that he has two choices. One is to apologize. The other is to leave the house."

"Is that the truth?" I asked my host.

"Tell him it is the truth," Hayward's idomitable words went on. The tone was of a threat—ominous, determined. The eyes of the two elder men met.

"She had nothing to explain," Southley told me falteringly.

I looked at the girl, and no man can measure or describe the anguish that was in her eyes. But she didn't look straight at me. First she glanced at the strong, bull-dog figure of the elder Hayward. Then she searched for her father's time-dimmed eyes, and here she found her answer.

"He's right, Dr. Long," she told me. "You must make your own explanations."

"It seems the gods are against me," I told them simply. "Mr. Southley, I have only done what any American man would have to do, and I can't and won't apologize to anyone. I have carried out the obligation of a guest to his host in the way my instincts told me. Nothing will make me believe that I did wrong. It is evident that you uphold what these other men say—and your daughter opposes them, too. And if you will have my bag brought to me, I will go at once."

The girl clasped her father's hands. A world of appeal was in her dark eyes.

"He can't go in this storm," she told him. "The road along the lake isn't safe. Tell him he can't go till the storm is over."

The elder Hayward chortled from beyond the table.

"A good welting might teach him manners," he suggested. "What about it, Southley?"

The tone was insistent, and perhaps it had a scornful quality, too.

"Of course, he can't go until the rain is done. I won't send out my cars on a night like this."

The girl whirled to me. Appeal was all over her.

"You won't go till tomorrow?" she pleaded. "Tell me, doctor. You won't go till the storm's over?"

"I can't very well, if your father won't let his cars go out," I tried to speak bitterly; but even after her betrayal, the very look of her softened me.

I found young Southley sitting before a little fire in the library, and he called to me as I passed. In spite of the warmth of the night, the little flame looked hospitable and kindly.

"Heavens, what a night!" he exclaimed. "I suppose you've heard about the tiger?"

"Of course, I know the legend. Anything new?"

"Hasn't old Hayward told you? He and my father have been out talking to the servants, just a little while ago. He's quite an old beast, you know. Well, the colored people say he is walking again tonight."

"Nice little thing to think about as I drop to sleep," I suggested.

"Isn't it? We have an old gardener that we call Mose. Mose was calling a horse about eleven o'clock. Rather it was somewhat before eleven, because you and the older Hayward were out on the golf green for your late evening walk."

"Go on," I urged. "Mose was riding home. I suppose he saw the ghost-tiger floating through the air, or riding a broomstick—"

"Nothing quite so bizarre as that, I'm sorry to say. Maybe I talk lightly, but I'm feeling rather serious, Long. If our tiger had done nothing except ride a broom, or fly, or something, it would have been a good legend to tell our children—and toast to in good vintage. But unfortunately—our tiger took other ways of manifesting himself. All he did was frighten Mose's horse—and leave his track in the earth."

The man spoke wholly without emotion. He smiled a little, too—a rather wan, hopeless smile that was singularly upsetting to the spirit.

"His track?" I echoed. "You—"

"He saw a great yellow and black cat—almost as large as a pony. But that isn't quite all. Mose kept his head. He told himself it was a delusion, just as you and I have told ourselves many times. So he controlled his horse then looked down at the moonlit road. It was covered with dust, and he could see very plainly. And he saw—just what I told you."

I spoke very quietly.

"Track?"

"Yes—as big as his two hands, clear across the road. He wanted to take father and the Haywards and I down to see them. I think all of us except father, who is rather old for such excursions, were going—but something has evidently diverted them. They were to meet me here."

"I suppose the rain has spoiled them now."

"Weakened them, anyway. Of course, the colored people are terrified. The night the tiger first went wild was just on such a night as this—in the middle of the storm. They say on such nights as these—he likes to come back into the warm, dry house, and play in the curtains."

In a few minutes more we were out where the rain beat upon us. The road was already washed with water. It didn't seem possible that if there had really been mysterious tracks in the dust, that they could have endured the storm.

"I've got some fine plans for tomorrow—if it just clears up," the youth told me joyously as we tramped up the road. I think he was trying to divert his mind, as well as mine, from the business in hand.

"I'm sorry, Ernest," I told him. "I'm going home tomorrow."

He stopped in his tracks, and I urged him on.

"Going home? Good Lord, why? I thought you'd stay to see us through. Of course, I can't blame you—"

"I've got to make a living," I told him lightly. "It's time I went to work."

"But you were going to stay a full week—and you promised sis last night that you would make it ten days or two weeks."

"Did she tell you that?"

"Tell me? I should say she did. She danced a highland fling."

It didn't make the scene of the hour before any more pleasant to remember. She had seemed glad when I had told her that I had postponed my departure. And even now Ernest's words filled me with a strange, soaring gladness that I tried to fight off. She had proved the hour before how much she really cared. She belonged to Vilas, not me, in spite of the fact that she had been ready to kill him when I opened the door of the den. I remembered every smile—each had been an epoch—every softness in her dark eyes, every tremor of her lips.

We tramped through the downpour, and soon we came to the point that the negro had described. Then we began to search about with the lanterns. It must have made a strange picture—the distant lightning, the glowing lanterns, our two tall figures in the yellow raincoats. The great house was dark behind us.

(Continued Next Week)

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