

The Strength Of The Pines

by Edison Marshall Author of "The Voice of the Pack" Illustrations by Irwin Myers



BOOK ONE

THE CALL OF THE BLOOD

CHAPTER I

Bruce was wakened by the sharp ring of his telephone bell. Instantly he was fully aroused, in complete control of all his faculties. And this is not especially common to men bred in the security of civilization.

Then he grunted rebelliously and glanced at his watch beneath the pillow. He had just to bed early; it was just midnight now.

He had no doubts whatever concerning the nature of this call. There had been one hundred like it during the previous month. His foster father had recently died, his estate was being settled up, and Bruce had been having a somewhat strenuous time with his creditors. He understood the man's real financial situation at last; at his death the whole business structure collapsed like the eggshell it was.

Bruce had supposed that most of the debts had been paid now; he wondered, as he fumbled into his bedroom slippers, whether the thousand or so dollars that were left would cover the claim of the man who was now calling him to the telephone.

"This is Mr. Duncan," he said coldly into the transmitter.

"How do you do, Mr. Duncan," a voice answered. "Pardon me if I got you up. I want to talk to your son, Bruce."

Bruce emitted a little gasp of amazement. Whoever talked at the end of the line obviously didn't know that the elder Duncan was dead. Bruce had a moment of grim humor in which he mused that this voice would have done rather well if it could arouse his foster father to answer it.

"The elder Mr. Duncan died last month," he answered simply. There was not the slightest trace of emotion in his tone. No waver on the street could have been as far as facts went, more of a stranger to him; there was no sense of loss at his death and no cause for pretense now.

"Of course I asked why she hadn't written to Duncan. The answer was simple enough—that she didn't know how to write. Those in the mountains that could write wouldn't, or couldn't—she was a little vague on that point—dispatch a letter. Something is up, Bruce, and I don't know what. But she said—for you to come back and find—Linda."

"What else did she say?" Bruce asked.

"She said to come back and find—Linda." Bruce answered with the same sternness—each word distinct. "For you to come—and she made me swear to tell you—on the first train. That's all."

"You'll be there in a minute." Bruce hung up, slowly descended to his library, and flashed on the lights.

For the first time he was revealed plainly. His was a familiar type; but at the same time the best type, too. He had the face and the body of an athlete, a man who keeps himself fit; and there was nothing makeshift or effeminate about him.

He had only a few minutes to wait; then Barney Wegan tapped at his door. This man was bronzed by the sun, never more fit, never straighter and taller and more lithe. He had just come from the far places. The embarrassment that Bruce had detected in his voice was in his face and manner, too.

The Man's Voice Broke and Changed. "Isn't that Queer, Bruce?"

There was no time to lose. "The man's voice broke and changed. 'Isn't that queer, Bruce?'" Bruce slowly stiffened; the only sign of emotion was one that even Barney's eyes, trained to the dimness of the wilderness, failed to see.

—did you get the idea that the old woman was Linda?"

"I didn't get that idea," Barney answered. "She spoke of Linda as she might a young girl."

"And how do you get that?" "Buy a ticket for Deer Creek, in southern Oregon." There was no need for Bruce to write the name. It was branded, ineffaceably, in his consciousness.

CHAPTER II

Before the gray dawn came over the land Bruce Duncan had started westward. He had no self-annoyment at the lightning decision. He was only strangely and deeply exultant.

The reasons why went deep within him to be easily seen. In the first place, it was adventure—and Bruce's life had not been very adventurous heretofore.

Finally there remained the eminent fact that this was an answer to his dream. He was going toward Linda, at last. The girl had been the one living creature in his memory that he had cared for and who cared for him.

He was quite a big boy, nearly ten, when he finally left the Square house. And there was nothing flickering or dim about the memory of this occasion.

The few times that his memory-picture did come to him, it brought a number of things with it. One of them was great and overwhelming realization of some terrible tragedy and terror the nature of which he could not even guess.

"She's been through fire," the nurse told the doctor when he came in and the door had closed behind the woman. Bruce did remember these words, because many years elapsed before he completely puzzled them out.

The superintendent seemed to wait a long time before answering. Little Bruce, already full of secret conjectures as to his own parentage, thought that some key might be given him at last.

The woman had kissed him and gone quickly; and he had been too young to remember if she had carried any sort of bundle close to her breast. Yet the man considered, there must have been such a bundle—otherwise he couldn't possibly account for Linda.

Linda had been homely; even a small boy could notice that. Besides, Linda was nearly six when Bruce had left for good; and he was then at an age in which impressions begin to be lasting.

"Brother Bruce, of course, Linda was of course a sister." Linda had been homely; even a small boy could notice that. Besides, Linda was nearly six when Bruce had left for good; and he was then at an age in which impressions begin to be lasting.

He was fond of drawing pictures. There was nothing in itself; many little boys are fond of drawing pictures. Nor were his unusually good. They looked to draw animals in particular—the animals he read about in school—and in such books as were brought

to him. And sometimes he drew Indians and cowboys. And one day—when he wasn't half watching what he was doing—he drew something quite different.

Perhaps he wouldn't have looked at it twice, if the teacher hadn't stepped up behind him and taken it out of his hands. It was "geography" then, "drawing," and he should have been "paying attention."

"What is this, Bruce?" she asked. "What have you been drawing?" "I—I don't know," the child answered.

"Not had for a six-year-old boy," the teacher commented. "But where, Bruce, have you ever seen or heard of such pines?"

Another puzzling adventure that stuck in Bruce's memory had happened only a few months after his arrival at the Square house, when a man had taken him home on trial with the idea of adoption.

All the incidents and details of the excursion with this prospective parent were extremely dim and vague. He did not know to what city he went, nor had he any recollection whatever of the people he met there.

"He wasn't do," the stranger had said. "I tried him out and he won't fill in my family. And I've fetched him back."

"I believe in being frank, and I tell you there's something vicious in that boy's nature. It came out the very first moment he was in the house, when the Missus was introducing him to my eight-year-old son."

Nor did the superintendent understand; nor—in these later years—Bruce either.

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The man's eyes traveled slowly from the child's curly head to his rapidly growing feet; but no gleam of interest came into the thin face.

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There was also a moon that cast a little square of light, like a fairy tapestry, on the floor. It was not such a moon as leers down red and strange through the smoke of cities.

There were no tall buildings, lighted by a thousand electric lights, such as Bruce could see through the windows of his bedroom at night.

The light prevented any further scrutiny of the moon and stars. And what remained to look at was not nearly so pleasing to the spirit.

No one could look twice at that massive physique and question its might. He seemed almost gigantic in the yellow lamplight. In reality he stood six feet and almost three inches, and his frame was perfectly in proportion.

The face was huge, big and gaunt of bone; and particularly one would notice the mouth. It would be noticed even before the dark, deep-sunken eyes. It was a bloodthirst mouth, the mouth of a man of great and terrible passions, and there was an unmistakable measure of cruelty and savagery about it.

"Come in, Dave," he said. In this little remark lay something of the man's power. The visitor had come unannounced. His visit had been

unexpected. His host had not yet seen his face. Yet the man knew, before the door was opened, who it was that had come.

The reason went back to a certain quickening of the senses that is the peculiar right and property of most men who are really residents of the wilderness. This man was the son of the wild as much as the wolves that ran in the packs.

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He blurred out his news at once. "Old Elvira has got word down to the settlements at last," he said.

There was no muscular response in the larger man. Dave was plainly disappointed. He wanted his news to cause a stir. It was true, however, that his host slowly raised his eyes.

"What do you mean?" the man demanded.

"Mean—I mean just what I said. We should have watched closer. Bill—Young Bill, I mean—saw a city chap just in the act of going in to see her. He had come onto the plateau with his guide—Wegan was the man's name—and Bill said he stayed a lot longer than he would have if he hadn't taken a message from her."

"How long ago was this?" "Week ago Tuesday."

When Dave's chief asked questions in this tone, answers always came quickly. They rolled so fast from the mouth that they blurred and ran together.

"There wasn't, eh? I don't suppose you ever thought that there's yet two months before we can clinch this thing or good, and young Folger might—I say might—have kicking about somewhere in his belongings the very document we've all of us been worrying about for twenty years."

But the paths men take, seemingly, with wholly different aims, crisscross and become intertwined much more than Bruce knew. Even as he lay in his berth, the first sweet drifting of sleep upon him, he was the subject of a discussion in a far-distant mountain home, and sleep would not have fallen so easily and sweetly if he had heard it.

It might have been a different world. Only a glimpse of it, illumined by the moon, could be seen through the soiled and besmirched window pane; but that was enough to tell the story. There were no tall buildings, lighted by a thousand electric lights, such as Bruce could see through the windows of his bedroom at night.

The train came to a sliding halt at Deer Creek, paused an infinitesimal fraction of a second, and rumbled on in its ceaseless journey. That infinitesimal fraction was long enough for Bruce, peered on the bottom step of a speeding car, to swing down on to the gravel right-of-way.

Duncan's next impression was one of infinite solitude. He hadn't read any guidebooks about Deer Creek, and he had expected some sort of town. But here was one little wooden structure with only three sides—the opening facing the track. It was evidently the waiting room used by the mountain men as they waited for their local trains.

There were no porters to carry his bag. There were no shouting officials. His only companions were the stars and the moon and, farther up the slope, certain tall trees that tapered to incredible points almost in the region where the stars began.

The whole scene, for causes deeper than any words may ever seek and reveal, moved him past any experience in his life. It was wholly new.

He turned about until the wind was in his face. It was full of fragrances—strange, indescribable smells that seemed to call up a forgotten world. They carried a message to him, but he yet hadn't made out its meaning.

Perhaps there were sounds, but they only seemed part of the silence. The faintest rustle in the world reached him from the forests above of many little winds playing a running game between the trunks, and the stir of the Little People, moving in their midnight occupations. Each of these sounds had its message for Bruce. They all seemed to be trying to tell him something, to make clear some great truth that was dawning in his consciousness.

He was not in the least afraid. He felt at peace as never before. He picked up his bag, and with stealing steps approached the long slope below. The moon showed him a fallen

log, and he found a comfortable seat on the ground beside it, his back against its bark. Then he waited for the dawn to come out.

The night hours passed. The sense of peace seemed to deepen on the man. He sat relaxed, his brown face gave his eyes lifted. The stars began to dim and draw back farther into the recesses of the sky.

It widened. The light grew. The night wind played one more game between the tree trunks and slipped away to the Home of Winda that lies somewhere above the mountains. The little night sounds were slowly stifled.

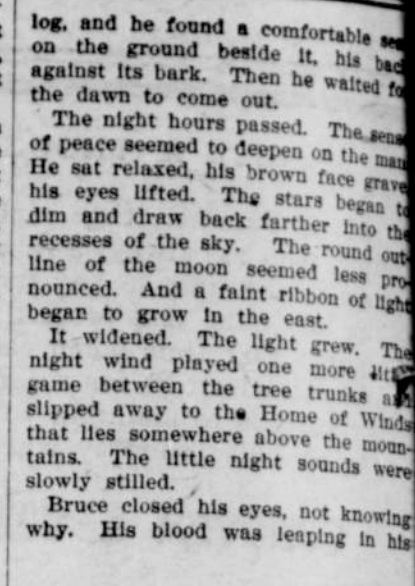
Bruce closed his eyes, not knowing why. His blood was leaping in his veins. An unfamiliar excitement, almost an exultation, had come upon him.

Then he opened his eyes. The light had grown around him. His hands were quite plain. Slowly, as a man raises his eyes to a miracle, he lifted his face.

The forest was no longer obscured in darkness. The great trees had emerged, and the dusk of that twilight was left between them.

He saw them plainly—their symmetrical forms, their declining limbs, their tall tops piercing the sky. He saw them as they were—those ancient, eternal symbols and watchmen of the wilderness. And he knew them at last, acquaintances long forgotten but remembered now.

"The pines!" he cried. He leaped to his feet with flashing eyes. "I have come back to the pines!"



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"I have come back to the pines!" CHAPTER V

The dawn revealed a narrow road along the bank of Deer Creek—a brown little wanderer which, winding here and there, did not seem to know exactly where it wished to go.

He gave the problem a moment's thought. "Take the road up the Divide," Barney Wegan had said; and at once Bruce knew that the course lay up the creek, rather than down.

A divide means simply the high places between one watershed and another, and of course Trail's End lay somewhere beyond the source of the stream.

The creek itself was apparently a sub-tributary of the Rogue, the great river to the south. Bruce was in a mood to be delighted, these early morning hours. He was on the way to Linda; a dream was about to come true.

The whole adventure was of the most thrilling and joyous anticipations. He did not feel the load of his heavy suitcases. It was nothing to his magnificent young strength.

The sun rose higher, and he began to feel its power. The sweat came out on his bronze face, but he never felt better in his life. There was but one great need, and that was breakfast.

A man of his physique feels hunger quickly. The sensation increased in intensity, and the suitcase grew correspondingly heavy. And all at once he stopped short in the road.

The impulse along his nerves to his leg muscles was checked, like an electric current at the closing of a switch, and an instinct of unknown origin struggled for expression within him.

In an instant he had it. He didn't know where it came. It was nothing he had read or that any one had told him. It seemed to be rather the result of some experience in his own immediate life, an occurrence of so long ago that he had forgotten it.

He suddenly knew where he could find his breakfast. He set his suitcase down, and with the confidence of a man who hears the dinner call in his own home, he struck off into the thickets beside the creek bed. Instantly—and really, after all, instinct is nothing but memory—led his steps true.

He glanced here and there, not even wondering at the singular fact that he did not know exactly what manner of food he was seeking. In a moment he came to a growth of thorns covered bushes, a thicket that only the she-bear knew how to penetrate.

But it was enough for Bruce just to stand at its edges. The bushes

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