

The Strength of the Pines

By Edison Marshall

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SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I.—At the death of his foster father, Bruce Duncan, in an eastern city, receives a mysterious message, sent by a Mrs. Ross, summoning him peremptorily to southern Oregon—to meet "Linda."

CHAPTER II.—Bruce has vivid but baffling recollections of his childhood in an orphanage, before his adoption by New- ton Duncan, with the girl Linda.

CHAPTER III.—At his destination, Trall's End, news that a message has been sent to Bruce is received with marked displeasure by a man introduced to the reader as "Simon."

CHAPTER IV.—Leaving the train, Bruce is astonished at his apparent familiarity with the surroundings, though to his knowledge he has never been there.

CHAPTER V.—Obedient to the message, Bruce makes his way to Martin's cross-roads store, for direction as to reaching Mrs. Ross' cabin.

CHAPTER VI.—On the way, "Simon" sternly warns him to give up his quest and return East. Bruce refuses.

CHAPTER VII.—Mrs. Ross, aged and infirm, welcomes him with emotion. She hastens him on his way—the end of "Pine-Needle Trail."

First time he began to despair, feeling that another night of overpowering impatience must be spent before he could reach Trall's End. The stars began to push through the darkening sky. Then, fainter than the gleam of a firefly, he saw the faint light of a far distant camp fire.

His heart bounded. He knew what was there. It was the end of the trail at last. And it guided him the rest of the way. When he reached the top of a little rise in the trail, the whole scene was laid out in mystery below him.

The fire had been built at the door of a mountain house—a log structure of perhaps four rooms. The freight played in its open doorway. Something beside it caught his attention, and instinctively he followed it with his eyes until it ended in an incredible region of the stars. It was a great pine tree, the largest he had ever seen—seemingly a great sentinel over all the land.

But the sudden awe that came over him at the sight of it was cut short by the sight of a girl's figure in the freight. He had an instant's sense that he had come to the wilderness' heart at last, that this tall tree was its symbol, that if he could understand the eternal watch that it kept over this mountain world, he would have an understanding of all things—but all these thoughts were submerged in the realization that he had come back to Linda at last.

He had known how the mountains would seem. All that he had beheld today was just the recurrence of things he had long ago. Nothing had seemed different from what he had expected; rather he had a sense that a lost world had been returned to him, and it was almost as if he had never been away. But the girl in the freight did not answer in the least degree the picture he had carried of Linda.

He remembered her as a blond-headed little girl with irregular features and a rather unreasonable allowance of homeliness. All the way he had thought of her as a baby sister—not as a woman in her flower. For a long second he gazed at her in speechless amazement.

Her hair was no longer blond. True, it had peculiar red lights when the firelight shone through it; but he knew by the light of day it would be deep brown. He remembered her as an awkward little thing that was hardly able to keep her feet under her. This tall girl had the wilderness grace—which is the grace of a deer and only blind eyes cannot see it. He dimly knew that she wore a khaki-colored skirt and a simple blouse of white tied with a blue scarf. Her arms were bare in the fire's gleam. And there was a dark beauty about her face that simply could not be denied.

She came toward him, and her hands were open before her. And her lips trembled. Bruce could see them in the firelight. It was a strange meeting. The firelight gave it a tone of unreality, and the whole forest world seemed to pause in its whispered business as if to watch. It was as if they had been brought face to face by the mandates of an inexorable destiny.

"So you've come?" the girl said. The words were spoken unusually soft, scarcely above a whisper; but they were inexpressibly vivid to Bruce. They told first of a boundless relief and joy at his coming. But more than that, in these deep vibrant tones was the expression of an unquenchable life and spirit. Every fiber of the body lived in the fullest sense; he knew this fact the instant that she spoke.

She smiled at him, ever so quietly. "Bvovaboo," she said, recalling the name by which she called him in her babyhood, "you've come to Linda."

CHAPTER IX

As the fire burned down to coals and the stars wheeled through the sky, Linda told her story. The two of them were seated in the soft grass in front of the cabin, and the moonlight was on Linda's face as she talked. She talked very low at first. Indeed there was no need for loud tones. The whole wilderness world was heavy with silence, and a whisper carried far. Besides, Bruce was just beside her, watching her with narrowed eyes, forgetful of everything except her story.

"I've waited a long time to tell you this," she told him. "Of course, when we were babies together in the orphanage, I didn't even know it. It has taken me a long time since to learn all the details; most of them I got from my aunt, old Elmira, whom you talked to on the way out. Part of it I knew by intuition, and a little of it is still doubtful.

"You ought to know first how hard I have tried to reach you. Of course, I didn't try openly except at first—the first years after I came here, and before I was old enough to understand." She spoke the last word with a curious depth of feeling and a perceptible hardness about her lips and eyes. "I remembered just two things. That the man who had adopted you was Newton Duncan; one of the nurses at the asylum told me that. And I remembered the name of the city where he had taken you.

"You must understand the difficulties I worked under. There is no rural free delivery up here, you know. Bruce, our mail is sent from and delivered to the little post office at Martin's store—over fifteen miles from here. And some member of a certain family that lives near here goes down every week to get the mail for the entire district.

"At first—and that was before I really understood—I wrote you many letters and gave them to one of this family to mail for me. I was just a child then, you must know, and I lived in the same house with these people. They were just baby letters from—from Linda-Tinda to Bvovaboo—letters about the deer and the berries and the squirrels—and all the wild things that lived up here.

"Berries!" Bruce cried. "I had some on the way up." His tone wavered, and he seemed to be speaking far away. "I had some once—long ago."

"Yes, you will understand, soon. I didn't understand why you didn't answer my letters. I understand now, though. You never got them."

"No, I never got them. But there are several Duncans in my city. They might have gone astray."

"They went astray—but it was before they ever reached the post office. They were never mailed, Bruce. I was to know why, later. Even then it was part of the plan that I should never get in communication with you again—that you would be lost to me forever.

"When I got older, I tried other tactics. I wrote to the asylum, enclosing a letter to you. But those letters were not mailed, either."

"Now we can skip a long time. I grew up. I knew everything at last and no longer lived with the family I mentioned before. I came here, to this old house—and made it decent to live in. I cut my own wood for my fuel except when one of the men tried to please me by cutting it for me. I wouldn't use it at first. Oh, Bruce—I wouldn't touch it!"

Her face was so longer lovely. It was drawn with terrible passions. But she quieted at once.

"At last I saw plainly that I was a little fool—that all they would do for me, the better off I was. At first, I almost starved to death because I wouldn't use the food that they sent me. I tried to grub it out of the hills. But I came to it at last. But, Bruce, there were many things I didn't come to. Since I learned the truth, I have never given one of them a smile except in scorn, not a word that wasn't a word of hate.

"You are a city man, Bruce. You don't know what hate means. It doesn't live in the cities. But it lives up here. Believe me, if you ever believed anything—that it lives up here. The most bitter and the blackest hate—from birth until death! It burns out the heart, Bruce. But I don't know that I can make you understand."

She glanced toward him quickly, and it was entirely plain that the quiet tone in his voice had surprised



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her. Perhaps the faintest flicker of admiration came into her eyes.

"He tried to stop you, did he? Of course he would. And you came, anyway. May heaven bless you for it, Bruce!" She leaned toward him, appealing. "And forgive me what I said."

Bruce stared at her in amazement. He could hardly realize that this was the same voice that had been so torn with passion a moment before. In an instant all her hardness was gone, and the tenderness of a sweet and wholesome nature had taken its place. He felt a curious warmth stealing over him.

"They meant what they said, Bruce. Believe me, if those men can do no other thing, they can keep their word. They didn't just threaten death to me. I could have run the risk of that. Badly as I wanted to make them pay before I died, I would have gladly run that risk.

"You are amazed at the free way I speak of death. The girls you know, in the city, don't even know the word. They don't know what it means. They don't understand the sudden end of the light—the darkness—the cold—the awful fear that it is! It's a reality here, something to fight against every hour of every day. There are just three things to do in the mountains—to live and love and hate. There's no softness. There's no middle ground." She smiled grimly.

"I've lived with death, and I've heard of it, and I've seen it all my life. If there hadn't been any other way, I would have seen it in the dramas of the wild creatures that go on around me all the time. You'll get down to cases here, Bruce—or else you'll run away. These men said they'd do worse things to me than kill me—and I didn't dare take the risk.

"But once or twice I was able to get word to old Elmira—the only ally I had left. She was of the true breed, Bruce. You'll call her a hag, but she's a woman to be reckoned with. She could hate too—worse than a she-rattlesnake hates the man that killed her mate—and hating is all that's kept her alive. You shrink when I say the word. Maybe you won't shrink when I'm done.

"This old woman tried to get in communication with every stranger that visited the hills. You see, Bruce, she couldn't write, herself. And the one time I managed to get a written message down to her, telling her to give it to the first stranger to mail—one of my enemies got it away from her. I expected to die that night. I wasn't going to be alive when the clan came. The only reason I didn't was because Simon—the greatest of them all and the one I hate the most—kept his clan from coming. He had his own reasons.

"From then on she had to depend on word of mouth. But at last—just a few weeks ago—she found a man that knew you. And it is your story from now on."

"They were still a little while. Bruce arose and threw more wood on the fire.

"It's only the beginning," he said. "And you want me to tell you all?" she asked hesitantly.

"Of course. Why did I come here?" "You won't believe me when I say that I'm almost sorry I sent for you." She spoke almost breathlessly. "I didn't know that it would be like this. That you would come with a smile on your face and a light in your eyes, looking for happiness. And instead of happiness—to find all this!"

most five sections—three thousand acres—of as rich land as was ever plowed. That tract of land was acquired long ago by a family named Ross, and they got it through some kind of grant. I can't be definite as to the legal aspects of all this story. They don't matter anyway—only the results remain.

"These Ross men were frontiersmen of the first order. They were virtuous men too—trusting every one, and oh! what strength they had! With their own hands they cleared away the forest and put the land into rich pasture and hay and grain. They raised great herds of cattle and had flocks of sheep too.

"It was then that dark days began to come. Another family—headed by the father of the man I call Simon—migrated here from the mountain districts of Oklahoma. But they were not so ignorant as many mountain people, and they were 'killers.' Perhaps that's a word you don't know. Perhaps you didn't know it existed. A killer is a man that has killed other men. It isn't a hard thing to do at all, Bruce, after you are used to it. These people were used to it. And because they wanted these great lands—my own father's home—they began to kill the Rosses.

"At first they made no war on the Folgers. The Folgers, you must know, were good people, too, honest to the last penny. They were connected, by marriage only, to the Ross family. They were on our side clear through. At the beginning of the feud the head of the Folger family was just a young man, newly married. And he had a son after a while.

"The newcomers called it a feud. But it wasn't a feud—it was simply murder. Oh, yes, we killed some of them. Folger and my father and all his kin united against them, making a great clan—but they were nothing in strength compared to the usurpers. Simon himself was just a boy when it began. But he grew to be the greatest power, the leader of the enemy clan before he was twenty-one.

"You must know, Bruce, that my own father held the land. But he was so generous that his brothers who helped him farm it hardly realized that possession was in his name. And father was a dead shot. It took a long time before they could kill him."

The coldness that had come over her words did not in the least hide her depth of feeling. She gazed moodily into the darkness and spoke almost in a monotone.

"But Simon—just a boy then—and Dave, his brother, and the others of them kept after us like so many wolves. There was no escape. The only thing we could do was to fight back—and that was the way we learned to hate. A man can hate, Bruce, when he is fighting for his home. He can learn it very well when he sees his brother fall dead, or his father—or a stray bullet hit his wife. A woman can learn it, too, as old Elmira did, when she finds her son's body in the dead leaves. There was no law here to stop it. The little semblance of law that was in the valleys below regarded it as a blood-feud, and didn't bother itself about it. Besides—at first we were too proud to call for help. And after our numbers were few, the trails were watched—and those who tried to go down into the valleys—never got there.

"One after another the Rosses were killed, and I needn't make it any worse for you than I can help—by telling of each killing. Enough to say that at last no one was left except a few old men whose eyes were too dim to shoot straight, and my own father. And I was a baby then—just born.

"Then one night my father—seeing the fate that was coming down upon them—took the last course to defeat them. Matthew Folger—a connection by marriage—was still alive. Simon's clan hadn't attacked him yet. He had no share in the land, but instead lived in this house I live in now. He had a few cattle and some pasture land farther down the Divide. There had been no purpose in killing him. He hadn't been worth the extra bullet.

"One night my father left me asleep and stole through the forests to talk to him. They made an agreement. I have pieced it out, a little at a time. My father deeded all his land to Folger.

"I can understand now. The enemy clan pretended it was a blood-feud only—and that it was fair war to kill the Rosses. Although my father knew their real aim was to obtain the land, he didn't think they would dare kill Matthew Folger to get it. He knew that he himself would fall, sooner or later, but he thought that to kill Folger would show their cards—and that would be too much, even for Simon's people. But he didn't know. He hadn't foreseen to what lengths they would go."

Bruce leaned forward. "So they killed—Matthew Folger?" he asked. He didn't know that his face had gone suddenly stark white, and that a curious glitter had come to his eyes. He spoke breathlessly. For the name—Matthew Folger—called up vague memories that seemed to reveal great truths to him. The girl smiled grimly.

"Let me go on. My father deeded Folger the land. The deed was to go on record so that all the world would know that Folger owned it, and if the clan killed him it was plainly for the purposes of greed alone. But there was also a secret agreement—drawn up in black and white and to be kept hidden for twenty-one years. In this agreement, Folger promised to return to me—the only living heir of the Rosses—the lands acquired by the deed. In reality, he was only holding them in trust for me, and was to return them when I was twenty-one. In case of my father's death, Folger

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