

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 Mrs. Ross, summoning him peremptorily to southern Oregon to meet "Linda."

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

CHAPTER III.—At his destination, Trail'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's 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."

was to be my guardian until that time. "Folger knew the risk he ran, but he was a brave man and he did not care. Besides, he was my father's



The Girl Was Speaking Slowly Now, Evidently Watching the Effect of Her Words on Her Listener.

friend—and friendship goes far in the mountains. And my father was shot down before a week was past. "The clan had acted quick, you see. When Folger heard of it, before the dawn, he came to my father's house and carried me away. Before another night was done he was killed too." The perspiration leaped out on Bruce's forehead. The red glow of the fire was in his eyes. "He fell almost where this fire is built, with a thirty-three bullet in his brain. Which one of the clan killed him I do not know—but in all probability it was Simon himself—at that time only eighteen years of age. And Folger's little boy—something past four years old—wandered out in the moonlight, to find his father's body." The girl was speaking slowly now, evidently watching the effect of her words on her listener. He was bent forward, and his breath came in queer, whispering gusts. "Go on!" he ordered savagely. "Tell me the rest. Why do you keep me waiting?" The girl smiled again—like a sorceress. "Folger's wife was from the plains country," she told him slowly. "If she had been of the mountains she might have remained to do some killing on her own account. Like old Elmira herself remained to do—killing on her own account! But she was from cities, just as you are, but she—unlike you—had no mountain blood in her. She wasn't used to death, and perhaps she didn't know how to hate. She only knew how to be afraid. "They say that she went almost insane at the sight of that strong, brave man of hers lying still in the pine needles. She hadn't even known he was out of the house. He had gone out on some secret business—late at night. She had only one thing left—her baby boy and her little foster-daughter—little Linda Ross, who is before you now. Her only thought was to get those children out of that dreadful land of bloodshed and to hide them so that they could never come back. And she didn't even want them to know their true parentage. She seemed to realize that if they had known, both of them would return some time—to collect their debts. Sooner or later, that boy with the Folger blood in him and that girl with the Ross blood would return, to attempt to regain their ancient holdings, and to make the clan pay!

"All that was true were a few old women with hate in their hearts and a strange tradition to take the place of hope. They said that some time, if death spared them, they would see Folger's son come back again, and assert his rights. They said that a new champion would arise and right their wrongs. But mostly death didn't spare them. Only old Elmira is left. "What became of the secret agreement I do not know. I haven't any hope that you do, either. The deed was carried down to the courts by Sharp, one of the witnesses who managed to get past the guard, and put on file soon after it was written. The rest is short. Simon and his clan took up the land, swearing that Matthew Folger had deeded it to them the day he had procured it. They had a deed to show for it—a forgery. And the one thing that they feared, the one weak chain, was that this secret agreement between Folger and my father would be found. "You see what that would mean. It would show that he had no right to deed away the land, as he was simply holding it in trust for me. Old Elmira explained the matter to me—if I get mixed up on the legal end of it, excuse it. If that document could be found, their forged deed would be obviously invalid. And it angered them that they could not find it. "Of course they never filed their forged deed—afraid that the forgery would be discovered—but they kept it to show to any one that was interested. But they wanted to make themselves still safer. "There had been two witnesses to the agreement. One of them, a man named Sharp, died—or was killed—shortly after. The other, an old trapper named Hudson, was indifferent to the whole matter—he was just passing through and was at Folger's house for dinner the night Ross came. He is still living in these mountains, and he might be of value to us yet. "Of course the clan did not feel at all secure. They suspected the secret agreement had been mailed to some one to take care of, and they were afraid that it would be brought to light when the time was ripe. They knew perfectly that their forged deed never stand the test, so one of the things to do was to prevent their claim ever being contested. That meant to keep Folger's son in ignorance of the whole matter. "I hope I can make that clear. The deed from my father to Folger was on record, Folger was dead, and Folger's son would have every right and opportunity to contest the clan's claim to the land. If he could get the matter into court, he would surely win. "The second thing to do was to win me over. I was just a child, and it looked the easiest course of all. That's why I was stolen from the orphanage by one of Simon's brothers. The idea was simply that when the time came I would marry one of the clan and establish their claim to the land forever. "Up to a few weeks ago it seemed to me that sooner or later I would win out. Bruce, you can't dream what it meant! I thought that some time I could drive them out and make them pay, a little, for all they have done. But they've tricked me, after all. I thought that I would get word to Folger's son, who by inheritance would have a clear title to the land, and he, with the aid of the courts, could drive these usurpers out. But just recently I've found out that even this chance is all but gone. "Within a few more weeks they will have been in possession of the land for a full twenty years. Through some legal twist I don't understand, if a man pays taxes and has undisputed possession of land for that length of time, his title is secure. They failed to win me over, but it looks as if they had won, anyway. The only way that they can be defeated now is for that secret agreement—between my father and Folger—to reappear. And I've long ago given up all hope of that. "There is no court session between now and October thirtieth—when their twenty years of undisputed possession is culminated. There seems to be no chance to contest them—to make them bring that forged deed into the light before that time. We've lost, after all. And only one thing remains. "He looked up to find her eyes full upon him. He had never seen such eyes. They seemed to have sunk so deep into the flesh about them that only lurid slits remained. It was not that her lids were partly down. Rather it was because the flesh-sacks beneath them had become charged with her pounding blood. The fire's glow was in them and cast a strange glamor upon her face. It only added to the strangeness of the picture that she sat almost limp, rather than leaning forward in appeal. Bruce looked at her in growing awe. "But as the seconds passed he seemed no longer able to see her plainly. His eyes were misted and blurred, but they were empty of tears as Linda's own. Rather the focal point of his brain had become seared by a mounting flame within himself. The glow of the fire had seemingly spread until it encompassed the whole wilderness world. "What is the one thing that remains?" he asked her, whispering. She answered with a strange, terrible eagerness of tone. "The blood atonement," she said between back-drawn lips. **CHAPTER X** When the second hand of the watch in his pocket had made one more circuit, both Bruce and Linda found themselves upon their feet. The tension had broken at last. Her emotion

had been curbed too long. It broke from her in a flood. She seized his hands, and he started at their touch. "Don't you understand?" she cried. "You—you—you are Folger's son. You are the boy that crept out—under this very tree—to find him dead. All my life Elmira and I have prayed for you to come. And what are you going to do?" Her face was drawn in the white light of the moon. For an instant he seemed dazed. "Do?" he repeated. "I don't know what I'm going to do." "You don't?" she cried, in infinite scorn. "Are you just clay? Aren't you a man? Haven't you got arms to strike with and eyes to see along a rifle barrel? Are you a coward—and a weakling; one of your mother's blood, to run away? Haven't you anything to avenge? I thought you were a mountain man—that all your years in cities couldn't take that quality away from you! Haven't you any answer?" He looked up, a strange light growing on his face. "You mean—killing?" "What else? To kill—never to stop killing—one after another, until they are gone! Till Simon Turner and the whole Turner clan have paid the debts they owe." Bruce recoiled as if from a blow. "Turner? Did you say Turner?" he asked hoarsely. "Yes. That's the clan's name. I thought you knew." Bruce understood now his unprovoked attack on the little boy when he had been taken from the orphanage on trial. The boy had been named Turner, and the name had been enough to recall a great and terrible hatred that he had learned in earliest infancy. The name now recalled it again; the truth stood clear at last. It was the key to all the mystery of his life:



"Not Two, but Three," She Corrected, in the Hollow Voice of Uncounted Years.

it stirred him more than all of Linda's words. In an instant all the tragedy of his babyhood was recalled—the hushed talk between his parents, the oaths, the flames in their eyes, and finally the body he had found lying so still beneath the pines. It was always the Turners, the dread name that had filled his baby days with horror. He hadn't understood then, it had been blind hatred—hatred without understanding or self-analysis. As she watched, his mountain blood mounted to the ascendancy. A strange transformation came over him. The gentleness that he had acquired in his years of city life began to fall away from him. The mountains were claiming him again. His voice was cold and hard when he spoke. "Then you and I are no relation whatever." "None." "But we fight the same fight now." "Yes. Until we both win—or both die." Before he could speak again, a strange answer came out of the darkness. "Not two of you," a croaking old voice told him. It rose, shrill and cracked, from the shadows beyond the fire. They turned, and the moonlight showed a bent old figure hobbling toward them. It was old Elmira, her cane tapping along in front of her; and something that caught the moonlight lay in the hollow of her left arm. Her eyes still glowed under the grizzled brows. "Not two, but three," she corrected, in the hollow voice of uncounted years. In the magic of the moonlight it seemed quite fitting to both of them that she should have come. She was one of the triumvirate; they wondered why they had not missed her before. It was farther than she had walked in years, but her spirit had kept her up. She put the glittering object that she carried into Bruce's hands. It was a rifle—a repeating breech-loader of a famous make and a model of thirty years before. It was such a rifle as lives in legend, with sights as fine as a razor edge and an accuracy as great as light itself. Loving hands had polished it and kept it in perfect condition. "Matthew Folger's rifle," the old woman explained, "for Matthew Folger's son." And that is how Bruce Folger returned to the land of his birth—as most men do, unless death cheats them first—and how he made a pact to pay old debts of death.

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