

The Strength of the Pines

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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 promptly to southern Oregon—to meet "Linda."

CHAPTER II.—Bruce has vivid but baffling 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, Bruce is astonished at the apparent familiarity with the surroundings, though to his knowledge he has never been there.

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

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

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

BOOK TWO THE BLOOD ATONEMENT

CHAPTER XI

"Men own the day, but the night is ours," is an old saying among the wild folk that inhabit the forests of Trail's End. The saying originated long and long ago when the world was quite young. Before that time, likely enough, the beasts owned both the

day and the night, and you can imagine them denying man's superiority just as long as possible.

Of course the saying is ridiculous if applied to cities or perhaps even to the level, cleared lands of the Middle West. The reason is simply that the wild life is practically gone from these places. But a few places remain in America where the reign of the wild creatures, during the night hours at least, is still supreme. And Trail's End is one of them.

Bruce dressed slowly. He wouldn't waken the two women that slept in the next room, he thought. He crept slowly out into the gray dawn. He made straight for the great pine that stood a short distance from the house. For reasons unknown to him, the pine had come often into his dreams. He had thought that its limbs rubbed together and made words—but of the words themselves he had hardly caught the meaning. There was some high message in them, however; and the dream had left him with a vague curiosity, an unexplainable desire to see the forest monarch in the daylight.

He found to his delight that the tree was even more impressive in the vivid morning light than it had been at night. He was constantly awed by the size of it. He guessed its circumference as about twenty-five feet. The great lower limbs were themselves like massive tree trunks. Its top surpassed by fifty feet any pine in the vicinity.

He felt stilled and calmed. Such was its influence. And he turned with a start when he saw Linda in the doorway.

"I've been talking to the pine—all the morning," he told her.

"But it won't talk to you," she answered. "It talks only to the stars."

CHAPTER XII

Bruce and Linda had a long talk while the sun climbed up over the great ridges to the east and old Elmira cooked their breakfast. There was no passion in their words this morning. They had got down to a basis of cold planning.

"Let me refresh my memory about a few of those little things you told me," Bruce requested. "First—on what date does the twenty-year period—the Turners' possession of the land—expire?"

"On the thirtieth of October, of this year."

"Not very long, is it? Now you understand that on that date they will have had twenty years of undisputed possession of the land; they will have paid taxes on it that long; and unless their title is proven false between now and that date, we can't ever drive them out."

"That's just right." "And the full term of court doesn't begin until the fifth of the following month."

"Yes, we're beaten. That's all there is to it. Simon told me so the last time he talked to me." "It would be to his interest to have you think so. But Linda—we mustn't give up yet. We must try as long as one day remains. It seems to me that the first thing to do is to find the trapper, Hudson—the one witness that is still alive. He might be able to prove to the court that as my father never owned the land in reality, he couldn't possibly have deeded it to the Turners. Do you know where this Hudson is?"

"I asked old Elmira last night. She thinks she knows. A man told her he had his trap line on the upper Umpqua, and his main headquarters—you know that trappers have a string of camps—was at the mouth of Little river, that flows into the Umpqua. But it is a long way from here."

Bruce was still a moment. "How far?" he asked.

"Two full days' tramp at the least—barring out accidents. But if you think it is best—you can start out today."

Bruce was a man who made decisions quickly. "Then I'll start—right away. Can you tell me how to find the trail?"

"I can only tell you to go straight north."

"Then the thing to do is to get ready at once. And then try to bring Hudson back with me—down the valley. After we get there we can see what can be done."

Linda smiled rather sadly. "I'm not very hopeful. But it's our last chance—and we might as well make a try. There is no hope that the secret agreement will show up in these few weeks that remain. We'll get your things together at once."

They breakfasted, and after the simple meal was finished, Bruce packed for the journey. The two women walked with him, out under the pine.

Bruce shook old Elmira's scrawny hand, then she turned back at once

into the house. The man felt singularly grateful. He began to credit the old woman with a great deal of intuition, or else memories from her own girlhood of long and long ago. He did want a word alone with this strange girl of the pines. But when Elmira had gone in and the coast was clear, it wouldn't come to his lips.

"It seems strange," he said, "to come here only last night—and then to be leaving again."

It seemed to his astonished gaze that her lips trembled ever so slightly. "We have been waiting for each other a long time, Bwovaboo," she replied. She spoke rather low, not looking straight at him. "And I hate to have you go away so soon."

"But I'll be back—in a few days." "You don't know. No one ever knows when they start out in these mountains. Promise me, Bruce—to keep watch every minute. Remember there's nothing—nothing—that Simon won't stoop to do. He's like a wolf. He has no rules of fighting. He'd just as soon strike from ambush. How do I know that you'll ever come back again?"

"But I will." He smiled at her, and his eyes dropped from hers to her lips. He reached out and took her hand.

"Good-by, Linda," he said, smiling. She smiled in reply, and her old cheer seemed to return to her. "Good-by, Bwovaboo. Be careful."

"I'll be careful. And this reminds me of something."

"What?"

"That for all the time I've been away—and for all the time I'm going to be away now—I haven't done anything more—well, more intimate—than shake your hand."

Her answer was to put out her lips in the most natural way in the world. Bruce was usually deliberate in his motions; but all at once his deliberation fell away from him. There seemed to be no interlude of time between one position and another. His arms went about her, and he kissed her gently on the lips.

But it was not at all as they expected. Because Linda had not known many kisses, this little caress beneath the pine went very straight home indeed to them both. They fell apart, both of them suddenly sobered. The girl's eyes were tender and lustrous, but started too.

"Good-by, Linda," he told her.

"Good-by, Bwovaboo," she answered. He turned up the trail past the pine.

He did not know that she stood watching him a long time, her hands clasped over her breast.

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