

# The Strength of the Pines

By Edison Marshall

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

### 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 as an orphan, before his adoption by Newton Duncan, with the girl Linda.

CHAPTER III.—At his destination, Linda'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."

CHAPTER VIII.—Through a country painfully familiar, Bruce journeys, and finds his childhood playmate, Linda.

CHAPTER IX.—The girl tells him of wrongs committed by an enemy clan on her family, the Rosses. Lands occupied by the clan were stolen from the Rosses, and the family, with the exception of Aunt Elmirra (Mrs. Ross) and herself, wiped out by assassination. Bruce's father, Matthew Folger, was one of the victims. His mother had fled with Bruce and Linda. The girl, while small, had been kidnapped from the orphanage and brought to the mountains. Linda's father had died his hands to Matthew Folger, but the agreement, which would confute the enemy's claims to the property, has been lost.

CHAPTER X.—Bruce's mountain blood responds to the call of the blood-flood.

CHAPTER XI.—A giant tree, the Sentinel Pine, in front of Linda's cabin, seems to Bruce's excited imagination to be endeavoring to convey a message.

CHAPTER XII.—Bruce sets out in search of a trapper named Hudson, a witness to the agreement between Linda's father and Matthew Folger.

CHAPTER XIII.—A gigantic grizzly, known as the Killer, is the terror of the vicinity, because of his size and ferocity.

CHAPTER XIV.—Dave Turner, sent by Simon, bribes Hudson to swear falsely concerning the agreement, if brought to light, he knowing its whereabouts.

CHAPTER XV.—The grizzly, who knew it was cross; and he didn't care who knew it. He was hungry too; but hunger is an emotion for the beasts of prey to keep carefully to themselves.

The Killer moved quite softly. One would have marvelled how silently his great feet fell upon the dry earth and with what slight sound his heavy form moved through the thickets. He moved slowly, cautiously—all the time mounting farther up the little hill that rose from the banks of the stream. He came to an opening in the thicket, a little brown pathway that vanished quickly into the shadows of the covers.

The Killer slipped softly into the heavy brush just at its mouth. It was his ambush. Soon, he knew, some of the creatures that had bowers in the heart of the thicket would be coming along that trail onto the feeding grounds on the ridge. He had only to wait.

The night wind, rising somewhere in the region of the snow banks on the highest mountains, blew down into the Killer's face and brought messages that no human being may ever receive. Then his sharp ears heard the sound of brush cracked softly as some one of the larger forest creatures came up the trail toward him.

To the elk this smell was Fear itself. He knew the ways of men only too well. Too many times he had seen members of his herd fall stricken at a word from the glittering sticks they carried in their hands. He uttered a far-ringing snort.

It was a distinctive sound, beginning rather high on the scale as a loud whistle and descending into a deep bass howl. And the Killer knew perfectly what that sound meant. It was a simple way of saying that the elk would progress no farther down that trail. The bear leaped in wild fury.

The bull seemed to leap straight up. His muscles had been set at his first alarm from Turner's smell on the wind, and they drove forth the powerful limbs as if by a powder explosion. He was full in the air when the forepaws battered down where he had been. Then he dived away into the covers.

The grizzly knew better than to try to overtake him. Almost rabid with wrath he turned back to his ambush.

Simon Turner had given Dave very definite instructions concerning his embassy to Hudson. "The first thing this Bruce will do," Simon had said, "is to hunt up Hudson—the one living man that witnessed that agreement between Ross and old Folger. One reason is that he'll want to verify Linda's story. The next is to persuade the old man to go down to the courts with him as his witness. And what you have to do is line him up for our side first."

"You think—" Dave's eyes wandered about the room, "you think that's the best way?"

"I wouldn't be telling you to do it if I didn't think so," Simon laughed—a sudden, grim syllable. "Dave, you're a bloodthirsty devil. I see what you're thinking of—a safer way to keep him from telling. But you know the word I sent out. 'Go easy!' That's the wisest course to follow at present. The valley people pay more attention to such things than they used to; the fewer the killings, the wiser we will be. If he'll keep quiet for the hundred little him have it in peace."

It is not the mountain way to fraternize quickly, nor are the mountain men quick to show astonishment. Hudson had not seen another human being since his last visit to the settlements. Yet his voice indicated no surprise at this visitation.

"Howdy," he greeted.

"Help yourself. Supper just ready," Dave helped himself to the food of the man that, a moment before, he would have slain; and in the light of the high fire that followed the meal, he got down to the real business of the visit.

"I suppose you've forgotten that little deed you witnessed between old Matt Folger and Ross—twenty years ago," Dave began easily, his pipe between his teeth.

"Hudson turned with a cunning glitter in his eyes. 'Dave saw it and grew bolder. 'Who wants me to forget it?' Hudson demanded.

"I ain't said that anybody wants you to," Dave responded. "I asked you if you had."

Hudson was still a moment, stroking absently his beard. "If you want to know," he said, "I ain't forgotten. But there wasn't just a deed. There was an agreement, too."

But at that instant fate took a hand in the merry little chase. To the fawn, it was nothing but a sharp clang of metal behind him and an answering "shriek of pain—sounds that in its terror it heard but dimly. But it was an unlooked-for and tragic reality to the wolf. His leap was suddenly arrested in mid-air, and he was hurled to the ground with stunning force. Cruel metal teeth had seized his leg, and a strong chain held him when he tried to escape. He fought it with desperate savagery. The fawn leaped to safety.

But there was no need of the grizzly continuing its pursuit. Everything had turned out quite well for him, after all. A wolf is ever so much more filling than any kind of seasonal fawn; and the old gray pack leader was imprisoned and helpless in one of Hudson's traps.

In the first gray of morning, Dave Turner started back toward his home. "I'll go with you to the forks in the trail," Hudson told him. "I want to take a look at some of my traps, anyhow."

At the same hour—as soon as it was light enough to see—Bruce was finishing his breakfast in preparation for the last lap of his journey. He had passed the night by a spring on a long ridge almost in eye range of Hudson's camp. Now he was preparing to dip down into the Killer's den.

Turner and Hudson followed up the little creek.

The first of Hudson's sets proved empty. The second was about a turn in the creek, and a wall of brush made it impossible for him to tell at a distance whether or not he had made a catch. But when still a quarter of a mile distant, Hudson heard a sound that he thought he recognized. It was a high, sharp, agonized bark that dimmed into a low whine. "I believe I've got a coyote or a wolf up there," he said. They hastened their steps.

The whole picture loomed suddenly before their eyes. There was no wolf in the trap. The steel had sprung, certainly, but only a hideous fragment of a foot remained between the jaws. The bone had been broken sharply off, as a man might break a match in his fingers. There was no living wolf. Life had gone out of the gray body many minutes before. The two men saw all these things as a background only—dim details about the central figure. But the thing that froze them in their tracks with terror was the great, gray form of the Killer, not twenty feet distant, beside the mangled body of the wolf.

He dropped to his knee the very second that the gun leaped to his shoulder. He seemed to know that from a lower position the target would be more clearly revealed. The finger pressed back against the trigger.

The distance was far; Bruce was not a practiced rifle shot, and it bordered on the miraculous that his lead went anywhere near the bear's body. And it was true that the bullet did not reach a vital place. It stung like a wasp at the Killer's flank, however, cutting a shallow flesh wound. But it was enough to take his dreadful attention from the mortally wounded trapper in the pine needles.

He whirled about, growling furiously and biting at the wound. Then he stood still, turning his gaze first to the pale face of Dave Turner thirty feet above him in the pine. The eyes glowed in fury and hatred. He had found men out at last; they died even more easily than the fawn. He started to turn back to the fallen, and the rifle spoke again.

It was a complete miss, this time; yet the bear leaped in fear when the bullet thwacked into the dust beside him. He did not wait for a third. His caution suddenly returning to him, and perhaps his anger somewhat satiated by the blow he had dealt Hudson, he crashed into the security of the thicket.

Bruce waited a single instant, hoping for another glimpse of the creature; then ran down to aid Hudson. But in driving the bear from the trapper's helpless body he had already given all the aid that he could. Understanding came on for the Dequans—just a glimpse of a light as it faded. The blow had been more than any human being could survive; even now Hudson was entering upon that strange calm which often, so mercifully, immediately precedes death.

He opened his eyes and looked with some wonder into Bruce's face. The light in them was dimming, fading like a twilight, yet there was indication of neither confusion nor delirium.

There was, however, some indication of perplexity at the peculiar turn affairs had taken. "You're not Dave Turner," he said wonderingly.

It's hidden—just—out— The words were no longer audible to Dave, and what followed Bruce also strained to hear in vain. The lips ceased moving. The shadow grew in the eyes, and the lids flickered down over them. A traveler had gone.

Bruce got up, a strange, cold light in his eyes. He glanced up. Dave Turner was climbing slowly down the tree. Bruce made six strides and seized his rifle.

The effect on Dave was ludicrous. He clung fast to the tree limbs, as if he thought a bullet—like a grizzly's claws—could not reach him there. Bruce held the gun behind him, then stood waiting with his own weapon resting in his arms.

"Come down, Dave," he commanded. "The bear is gone."

Dave crept down the trunk and halted at its base. He studied the cold face before him. "Better not try nothing," he advised hoarsely.

"Why not?" Bruce asked. "Do you think I'm afraid of a coward?" The man started at the words; his head bobbed backward as if Bruce had struck him beneath the jaw with his fist.

"People don't call the Turners cowards and walk off with it," the man told him.

"You're always bringing news," he said. "If it's important as some of the other news you've brought don't take my time."

"All right," the other replied suddenly. "You don't have to hear it. But I'm telling you it's of real importance this time—and some time you'll find out." He scowled into the dark face. "But suit yourself."

Dave walked clear to the door, then turned. "Don't be a fool, Simon," he urged. "Listen to what I have to tell you. Bruce Folger knows where that secret agreement is."

For once in his life Dave got a response of sufficient emphasis to satisfy him. His brother whirled, his whole expression undergoing an immediate and startling change. If there was one emotion that Dave had never seen on Simon's face it was fear—and he didn't know for certain that he saw it now. But there was alarm—unmistakable—and surprise, too.

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "Out with it!" His tone was really urgent now, not insolent as usual. "Good Lord, man, don't you know that if Bruce gets that down to the settlements before the thirtieth of next month we're lost—and nothing in this world can save us? We can't drive him off, like we drove the Rosses. There's too much law down in the valleys. If he's got that paper, there's only one thing to do. Help me saddle a horse."

"Wait a minute. I didn't say he had it. I only said he knew where it was. He's still an hour or two walk from here, toward Little River, and if we have to wait for him on the trail, we've got plenty of time. And of course I ain't quite sure he does know where it is."

Simon smiled mirthlessly. "The news is beginning to sound like the rest of yours."



Dave Helped Himself to the Food of the Man That, a Moment Before, He Would Have Slain.



He Opened His Eyes and Looked With Some Wonder Into Bruce's Face.



"What Do You Mean? Out With It!"