

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 crossroads 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 puzzlingly 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. Linda occupied by the clan were stolen from the Rosses, and the family, with the exception of Aunt Elmira (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 lands to Matthew Folger. But the agreement, which would confer the enemy's claims to the property, has been lost.

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

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.

"What's the use of waiting? Who'd know?" The two men stood face to face in the quiet and deepening dusk of the barn; and there was growing determination on each face. "Every day our chance is less and less," Dave went on. "With this land behind him, he'd be in a position to pay old debts, to tell you, we should have met him on the trail and let the buzzards talk to him."

"Yes," Simon echoed in a strange half-whisper. "Let the buzzards talk to him."

Dave took fresh heart at the sound of that voice. "No one would have ever moved it," he went on. "No one would ever know it now. They'd find it bones, some time, maybe, but I'd be no one to point to. They'd never get anything against us. I tell you—it's all the way, or no way at all. Tell me to wait for him on the trail."

"Wait, wait a minute. How long before he will come?"

"Any time now. And don't postpone it matter any more. We're men, at babies. He's not a fool or a coward, either. And he's a show—I saw him plain enough—and how'd you like to have him shoot through your windows some time? Old Elmira and Linda have set him on, and he's hot as hell."

"I wish you'd get that old huffer he's got her son," Simon said. "I still spoke calmly; but it was plain enough that Dave's words were giving the desired effect. 'So he's been up the blood-fend, has he? I ought I gave his father some lessons that a long time since. Well, I suppose we must let him have his way!'"

"And remember, too," Dave urged, "that you told him when you met him the store. You said you wouldn't turn him twice."

"I remember." The two men were silent, but Dave stood no longer motionless. He was shivering all over with malice and fury.

"Then you've given the word?" he asked.

"I've given the word, but I'll do it my own way. Listen, Dave," Simon said, head bent deep in thought. "You'd better arrange to have Linda at the old hag out of the house when we get back."

"Yes."

"We've got to work this thing right, we can't operate in the open like we did to the blood-fend—but the thing to do is to let her come to us."

"But he won't do it. He'll go to the girl's first."

"Simon's face grew stern. 'I don't want any more interruptions, Dave. I can't see how you can give the impression that he attacked us first—on his own free will. What if he comes into a house—a man unknown to these parts—and something happens to him

there—in the dead of night? It wouldn't look so bad then, would it? Besides—if we got him here—before the clan, we might be able to find out where that document is. First, how can you tell when they're going to come?"

"He ought to be here very soon. The moon's bright and I can get up on the ridge and see his shadow through your field glasses when he crosses the big south pasture. That will give me a full half-hour before he comes."

"It's enough. I'm ready to give you your orders now. They are—just to use your head, and on some pretext get those two women out of the house so that Bruce can't find them when he returns. Don't let them come back for an hour, if you can help it. If it works—all right. If it doesn't, we'll use more direct measures. I'll tend to the rest."

He strode to the wall and took down a saddle from the hook. Quickly he threw it over the back of one of the cow ponies, the animal that he had punished. He put the bridle in Dave's hand. "Stop at the house for the glasses, then ride to the ridge at once," he ordered. "Then keep watch."

CHAPTER XVII

The day was quite dead when Dave Turner reached his post on top of the ridge. Fortunately, the moon rose early. Otherwise Dave's watch would have been in vain. He didn't have long to wait. At the end of a half-hour he saw, through the field glasses, the wavering of a strange black shadow on the distant meadow. He tried to get a better focus. It might be just the shadow of deer, come to browse on the parched grass. Dave felt a little tremor of excitement at the thought that if it were not Bruce, it was more likely the last of the grizzlies, the Killer. The previous night the gray forest king had made an excursion into Simon's pastures and had killed a yearling calf; in all probability he would return tonight to finish his feast. In fact, this night would in all probability see the end of the Killer. Some one of the Turners would wait for him, with a loaded rifle, in a safe ambush.

But it wasn't the Killer, after all. It was before his time; besides, the shadow was too slender to be that of the huge bear. Dave Turner watched a moment longer, so that there could be no possibility of a mistake. Bruce was returning; he was little more than a half-hour's walk from Linda's home.

Turner swung on his horse, then lashed the animal into a gallop. Less than five minutes later he drew up to a halt beneath the Sentinel Pine, almost a mile distant. For the first time, Dave began to move cautiously.

It would complicate matters if the two women had already gone to bed. The hour was early—not yet nine—but the fall of darkness is often the going-to-bed time of the mountain people. It is warmer there and safer; and the expense of candles is lessened. But tonight Linda and old Elmira were sitting up, waiting for Bruce's return.

A candle flame flickered at the window. Dave went up to the door and knocked.

"Who's there?" Elmira called. It was a habit learned in the dreadful days of twenty years ago, not to open a door without at least some knowledge of who stood without. A lighted doorway sets off a target almost as well as a field of white sets off a black bull's eye.

Dave knew the truth was the proper course. "Dave Turner," he replied. A long second of heavy, strange silence ensued. Then the woman spoke again. There was a new note in her voice, a curious hoarseness, but at the same time a note of defiance.

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the distant lights of his home at last. She got up from her chair and moved over to the little pack she had carried on her back when she had walked up from her cabin. Linda still gazed at her in growing wonder. The long years seemed to have fallen away from her; she slipped across the uncarpeted floor with the agility and silence of a flier. She always had given the impression of latent power, but never so much as now. She took some little object from the bag and slipped it next to her withered and scrawny breast.

"What do you want?" she called out into the gloom.

Dave had been getting a little restless in the silence; but the voice reassured him. "I'll tell you when you open the door. It's something about Bruce."

Linda remembered him then. She leaped to the door and flung it wide. She saw the stars without, the dark fringe of pines against the sky line behind. But most of all she saw the cunning, sharp-featured face of Dave Turner, with the candlelight upon him. The yellow beams were in his eyes, too. "You seemed full of guttering lights."

The few times that Linda had talked to Dave she had always felt uneasy beneath his speculative gaze. The same sensation swept over her now. She knew perfectly what she would have had to expect, long since, from this man, were it not that he had lived in fear of his brother Simon. The mighty leader of the clan had set a barrier around her as far as personal attentions went—and his reasons were obvious. The mountain girls do not usually attain her perfection of form and face; his desire for her was as jealous as it was intense and real. This dark-hearted man of great and terrible emotions did not only know how to hate. In his own savage way he could love too. Linda hated and feared him, but the emotion was wholly different from the dread and abhorrence with which she regarded Dave. "What about Bruce?" she demanded.

Dave leered. "Do you want to see him? He's lying—up here on the hill."

The tone was knowing, edged with cruelty; and it had the desired effect. The color swept from the girl's face. In a single fraction of an instant it showed stark white in the candlelight.

There was an instant's sensation of terrible cold. But her voice was hard and lifeless when she spoke.

"You mean you've killed him?" she asked simply.

"We ain't killed him. We've just been teaching him a lesson. Dave explained. "Simon warned him not to come up—and we've had to talk to him a little—with fists and heels."

Linda cried out then, one agonized syllable. She knew what fists and heels could do in the fights between the mountain men. They are as much weapons of torture as the claws and fangs of the Killer. She had an instant's dread picture of this strong man of hers lying maimed and broken, a battered, whimpering, ineffective thing in the moonlight of some distant hillside. The vision brought knowledge to her. Even more clearly than in the second of their kiss, before he had gone to see Hudson, she realized what an immutable part of her was. She gazed with growing horror at Dave's leering face. "Where is he?" she asked. She remembered, with singular steadfastness, the pistol she had concealed in her own room.

"I'll show you. If you want to get him in you'd better bring the old hag with you. It'll take two of you to carry him."

"I'll come," the old woman said from across the shadowed room. She spoke with a curious breathlessness. "I'll go at once."

The door closed behind the three of them, and they went out into the moonlit forest. Dave walked first. It was wholly characteristic of him that he should find a delectable rapture in showing these two women the terrible handiwork of the Turners. He rejoiced in just this sort of cruelty. Linda had no suspicion that this excursion was only a pretext to get the two women away from the house, and that his eagerness arose from deeper causes. It was true that Dave exulted in the work, and strangely the fact that it was part of the plot against Bruce had been almost forgotten in the face of a greater emotion. He was alone in the darkness with Linda—except of course for a helpless old woman—and the command of Simon in regard to his attitude toward her seemed suddenly dim and far away. He led them over a hill, into the deeper forest.

So intent was he that he quite failed to observe a singular little signal between old Elmira and Linda. The woman half turned about, giving the girl an instant's glimpse of something that she transferred from her breast to her sleeve. It was slender and of steel, and it caught the moonlight on its shining surface.

The girl's eyes glittered when she beheld it. She nodded, scarcely perceptibly, and the strange file plunged deeper into the shadows.

Fifteen minutes later Dave drew up to a halt in a little patch of moonlight, surrounded by a wall of low trees and brush.

"There's more than one way to make a date for a walk with a pretty girl," he said.

The girl stared coldly into his eyes. "What do you mean?" she asked.

The man laughed harshly. "I mean that Bruce ain't got back yet—he's still on the other side of Little river, for all I know."

"Then why did you bring us here?"

"Just to be sociable," Dave returned.

"I'll tell you, Linda. I wanted to talk to you. I ain't been in favor of a lot of things Simon's been doing—to you and your people. I thought maybe you and I would like to be—friends."

No one could mistake the emotion behind the strained tone, the pleading, languid in the furtive eyes. The girl drew back, shuddering. "I'm going back," she told him.

"Wait. I'll take you back soon. You've got a lot of friends. The old lady won't look—"

He laughed again, a hoarse sound that rang far through the silence. He moved toward her, hands reaching. She backed away. Then she half-trapped over an outstretched foot.

The next instant she was in his arms, struggling against their steel.

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you going to do?"

"I'm going back," Linda answered. "You had some other purpose in bringing me out here—or you wouldn't have brought Elmira, too. I'm going back to wait for Bruce."

"And you said I will linger here," Elmira told him. "We have many things to say to each other. We have many things to do. About my Abner—there are many things you'll want to hear of him."

The last vestige of the man's spirit broke beneath the words. Abner had been old Elmira's son—a youth who had laughed often, and the one hope of the old woman's declining years. And he had fallen before Dave's ambush in a half-forgotten fight of long years before.

The man slithered in his bonds. Linda turned to go. The silence of the wilderness deepened about them. "Oh, Linda, Linda," the man called. "Don't leave me. Don't leave me here with her!" he pleaded. "Please—please don't leave me in this devil's power. Make her let me go."

But Linda didn't seem to hear. The brush crackled and rustled; and the two—this dark-hearted man and the avenger—were left together.

CHAPTER XVIII

The homeward journey over the ridges had meant only pleasure to Bruce. The days had been full of little, nerve-tingling adventures, and the nights full of peace. And beyond all these, there was the hope of seeing Linda again at the end of the trail.

It was strange how he remembered her kiss. He had known other kisses in his days—being a purely rational and healthy young man—but there had been nothing of immortality about them. Their warmth had died quickly, and they had been forgotten. They were just delights of moonlight nights and nothing more. But he would wake up from his dreams at night to feel Linda's kiss upon his lips. To recall it brought a strange tenderness—a softening of all the hard outlines of his picture of life.

But aside from his contemplations of Linda, the long tramp had many delights for him. He rejoiced in every manifestation of the wild life about him, whether it was a bushy-tailed old gray squirrel, watching him from a tree limb, a magpie trying its best to insult him, or the feeling glimpse of a deer in the covert. But he didn't see the Killer again. He didn't particularly care to do so.

Both days of the journey home he watched sharply at dawn. The cool, morning hours were the best for travel. He was of naturally strong physique, and although the days fatigued him unmercifully, he always awakened refreshed in the dawn. At noon he would stop to lunch, eating a few pieces of jerky and frying a single flapjack in