

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 man whom he had never seen, but who is identified as southern Oregon—Linda.

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

CHAPTER III.—At his destination, Linda's End, Bruce receives a message from the man who introduced him to southern Oregon—Linda.

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

CHAPTER V.—Obedient to the message, Bruce makes his way to a small, remote, roadside store, for directions as to reaching Mrs. Ross's cabin.

CHAPTER VI.—On the way, "Simon," a sturdy man, tells him to give up his quest and return East. Bruce refuses.

CHAPTER VII.—Mrs. Ross, aged and infirm, welcomes him, and, after she has hastened him on his way—the end of "Pine-Needle Trail."

CHAPTER VIII.—Through a country puzzlingly familiar, Bruce journeys, and, in his childhood playground, 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, was 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 cabin and brought to the mountains. Linda's father had died his lands to Matthew Folger, but the agreement, which would confer the property on the Rosses, had been lost.

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

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 trapped outlaw, and, as witness to the agreement between Linda's father and Matthew Folger.

CHAPTER XIII.—Hudson and Dave visit the former's trail. A wolf, caught in one, is discovered by the killer. Distracted by his feat, the brute strikes down Hudson. Bruce, out on his way to Hudson, shoots and wounds the killer, driving him from his victim. Hudson, learning Bruce's identity, tries to tell him the hiding place of the agreement, but death summons him.

CHAPTER XIV.—Simon, believing Bruce knows where the document is concealed, lays plans to trap him.

CHAPTER XV.—Dave deceives Linda and Aunt Elmira from their home. The man insults Linda and is struck down by the aged woman. Elmira's son has been murdered by Dave, and at her command, Aunt Elmira binds the desperado. Linda leaves them alone.

CHAPTER XVI.—Returning, Bruce finds a note, pronounced from Linda, telling him she has been kidnapped by the Turners.

CHAPTER XVII.—Bruce falls into Simon's trap, and is made prisoner.

CHAPTER XVIII.—Charging Bruce with attempting to reopen the blood-fund, the clan, after a mock trial, decides to leave him, bound in a pasture on the spot where the killer had slain and half eaten a calf the night before. They look for the return of the agreement, and probable slaying of Bruce by the animal.

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

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

CHAPTER XXI.—Bruce, helpless, awaits arrival of the Killer and death.

CHAPTER XXII.—Simon makes Linda an offer of marriage. The girl refuses, telling him she loves Bruce. Enraged, the man brutally strikes her, and leaves. The girl is confident he will go to Bruce, and she follows him.

The Killer had been cheated again; and by the same token Simon's oath had been proved untrue. For once the remorseless strength of which he boasted had been worsted by a greater strength; and love, not hate, was the power that gave it. For once a girl's courage—a courage greater than that with which he obeyed the dictates of his cruel will—had cost him his victory. The war that he and his outlaw band had begun so long ago had not yet been won.

Indeed, if Simon could have seen what the moon saw as it peered out from behind the clouds, he would have known that one of the debts of blood incurred so many years ago had even now been paid. Far away on a distant hillside there was one who gave no heed to the fast hoof beats of the speeding horse. It was Dave Turner, and his trail of lust and wickedness was ended at last. He lay with lifted face, and there were curious dark stains on the pine needles.

And the pines, those tall, dark sentinels of the wilderness, seemed to look down upon him in passionless contemplation, as if they wondered at the stumbling ways of men. Their branches rubbed together and made words as the wind swept through them, but no man may say what those words were.

BOOK THREE

COMING OF THE STRENGTH

CHAPTER XXIV

Fall was at hand at Trail's End. The spirit of autumn had come with golden wings.

A buck deer—a noble creature with six points on his spreading horns—got the first inkling of it when he stopped at a spring to drink. The air had been chill in his nostrils, but thanks to a heavy growth of hair that—with mysterious foresight—had begun to come upon his body, it gave him no discomfort. But it was a puzzling and significant thing that the water he bent to drink had been transformed to something hard and white and burning cold to the tip of his nose.

It was the first real freeze. True, for the past few nights there had been a measure of tinkling, cobweb frost on the ground in wet places, but even the tender-skinned birds—always most watchful of signs of this kind—had disregarded it. But there was no dis-regarding this half-inch of blue ice that had covered the spring. The buck deer struck it angrily with his front hoofs, broke through and drank; then went snorting up the hill.

His anger was in itself a significant thing. In the long, easy-going summer days, Blacktail had almost forgotten what anger was like. He had been content to roam over the ridges, cropping the leaves and grass, avoiding danger and growing fat. But all at once this kind of existence had palled on him. He felt that he wanted only one thing—not food or drink, or safety—but a good, snatching, looking, hoof-carving battle with another buck of his own species. An unprovoked crossness had come upon him, and his soft eyes burned with a blue fire. He remembered the days, too—with a sudden leap of his mind—and wondered where they were keeping themselves. Being only a beast he did not know that this new belligerent spirit was just as much a sign of fall as the soft bluish that was coming on the leaves.

The simple fact was that fall means the beginning of the rut—the wild mating days when the bucks battle among themselves and choose their harems of does.

He had rather liked his appearance as he saw himself in the water of the spring. The last of the velvet had been rubbed from his horns, and the twelve times (six on each horn) were as hard and almost as sharp as so many bayonet points.

As the morning dawned, the change in the face of nature became ever more manifest. The leaves of the shrubbery began to change in color. The wind out of the north had a keener, more biting quality, and the birds were having some sort of exciting debate in the tree tops.

The birds are always a scurried, nervous, rather rattle-brained outfit, and seem wholly incapable of making a decision about anything without hours of argument and discussion. Their days are simply filled with one excitement after another, and they tell mere scandal in an hour than the old ladies in a resort manage in the entire summer. This slow transformation in the color of the leaves, not to mention the chill of the frost through their scanty feathers, had created a sensation from one end of birdland to another. And there was only one thing about it. That was to wait until the darkness closed down again, then start away toward the path of the sun in search of their winter resorts in the south.

The little people in the forest of ferns beneath were not such big birds, and they did not have such high-flying ideas as these feathered folk in the branches. They didn't talk such foolishness and small talk from dawn to dark. They didn't wear gay clothes that weren't a particle of good to them in cold weather. You can imagine them as being good, substantial, middle-class people, much more sober-minded, tending strictly to business and working hard, and among other things they saw no need of flitting down to southern resorts for the cold season. These people—being mostly ground squirrels and gophers and chipmunks and rabbits—had not been fitted by nature for wide travel and had made all arrangements for a pleasant winter at home. You could almost see a smile on the fat face of a plump old gopher when he came out

and found the frost upon the ground; for he knew that for months past he had been putting away stores for just this season. In the snows that would follow he would simply retire into the farthest recesses of his burrow and let the winds whistle vainly above him.

The larger creatures, however, were less complacent. The voles—if animals have any powers of foresight whatever—knew that only hard days, not luscious nuts and roots, were in store for them. There would be many days of hunger once the snow came over the land. The black bear saw the signs and began a desperate effort to lay up as many extra pounds of fat as possible before the snow broke. He would have need of the extra flesh. The time was coming when all sources of food would be cut off by the snows, and he would have to seek the security of hibernation. He had already chosen an underground abode for himself and there he could doze away in the cold-trance through the winter months, subsisting on the supplies of fat that he had stored next to his furry hide.

The greatest of all the bears, the Killer, knew that some such fate awaited him also. But he looked forward to it with wretched spirit. He was master of the forest, and perhaps he did not like to yield even to the spirit of winter. His savagery grew upon him every day, and his dislike for men had turned to a veritable hatred. But he had found them out. When he crossed their trails again, he would not wait to stalk. They were apt to slip away from him in this case and sting him unmercifully with bullets. The thing to do was charge quickly and strike with all his power.

The three minor wounds he had received—two from pistol bullets and one from Bruce's rifle—had not lessened his strength at all. They did, however, serve to keep his blood-heat at the explosive stage most of the day and night.

The flowers and the grasses were dying; the moths that paid calls on the flowers had laid their eggs and had perished, and winter lurked—ready to pounce forth—just beyond the distant mountains. There is nothing so thoroughly unreliable as the mountain autumn. It may linger in entrancing glows and browns month after month, until it is almost time for spring to come again; and again it may make one short bow and usher in the winter.

To Bruce and Linda, in the old Folger home in Trail's End, these fall days offered the last hope of success in their war against the Turners.

The adventure in the pasture with the Killer had handicapped them to an unlooked-for degree. Bruce's muscles had been severely strained by the bonds; several days had elapsed before he regained their full use. Linda was a mountain girl, hardy as a deer, yet her nerves had suffered a greater shock by the experience than either of them had guessed. The wild ride, the fear and the stress, and most of all the base blow that Simon had dealt her had been too much even for her strong constitution; and she had been obliged to go to bed for a few days of rest. Old Elmira worked about the house the same as ever, but strange, new lights were in her eyes. For reasons that went down to the roots of things, neither Bruce nor Linda questioned her as to her scene with Dave Turner in the covers; and what thoughts dwelt in her aged mind neither of them could guess.

The truth was that in these short weeks of trial and danger whatever dreadful events had come to pass in that meeting were worth neither thought nor words. Both Bruce and Linda were down to essentials. It is a blessing that most human beings—some time in their lives—find they are able to make; and there was no room for sentimentality or hysteria in this grim household. The ideas, the softnesses, the laws of the valleys were far away from them; they were face to face with realities. Their code had become the basic code of life: to kill for self-protection without mercy or remorse.

They did not know when the Turners would attack. It was the dark of the moon, and the men would be able to approach the house without presenting themselves as targets for Bruce's rifle. The danger was not a thing on which to conjecture and forget; it was an ever-present reality. Never they stepped out of the door, never they crossed a lighted window, never a pane rattled in the wind but that the wings of Death might have been hovering over them. The days were passing, the date when the chance for victory would utterly vanish was almost at hand, and they were haunted by the ghastly fact that their whole defense lay in a single thirty-three rifle and five cartridges. Bruce's own gun had been taken from him in Simon's house; Linda had emptied her pistol at the Killer.

"We've got to get more shells," Bruce told Linda. "The Turners won't be such fools as to wait until we have the moon again, to attack. I can't understand why they haven't already come. Of course, they don't know the condition of our ammunition supply, but it doesn't seem to me that that alone would have held them off. They are sure to come soon, and you know what we could do with five cartridges, don't you?"

"I know," she looked up into his earnest face. "We could die—that's all."

"Yes—like rabbits. Without hurting them at all. I wouldn't mind dying so much, if I did plenty of damage first. It's death for me, anyway, I suppose—and no one but a fool can see it otherwise. There are simply too many against us. But I do want to make some payment first."

Her hand fumbled and groped for his. Her eyes pleaded to him—more than any words. "And you mean you've given up hope?" she asked.

He smiled down at her—a grave, strange little smile that moved her in secret ways. "Not given up hope, Linda," he said gently. "They were standing at the door and the sunlight—coming low from the south—was on his face. 'I've never had any hope to give up—just realization of what lay ahead of us. I'm looking it all in the face now, just as I did at first.'"

"And what you see—makes you afraid?"

Yet she need not have asked that question. His face gave an unmistakable answer; for that man had conquered fear in the terrible night with the Killer. "Not afraid, Linda," he explained, "only seeing things as they



"And You Mean You've Given Up Hope?" She Asked.

really are. There are too many against us. If we had that great estate behind us, with all its wealth, we might have a chance; if we had an arsenal of rifles with thousands of cartridges, we might make a stand against them. But we are three—two women and one man—and one rifle between us all. Five little shells to be expended in five seconds. They are seven or eight, each man armed, each man a rifle shot. They are certain to attack within a day or two—before we have the moon again. In less than two weeks we can no longer contest their title to the estate. A little month or two more and we will be snowed in—with no chance to get out at all."

"Perhaps before that," she told him. "Yes. Perhaps before that."

They found a confirmation of this prophecy in the signs of fall without—the coloring leaves, the dying flowers, the new, cold breath of the wind. Only the pines remained unchanged; they were the same grave sentinels they always were.

"And you can forgive me?" Linda asked, humbly.

"Forgive you?" The man turned to her in surprise. "What have you done that needs to be forgiven?"

"Oh, don't you see? To bring you here—out of your office—to throw your life away. To enlist you in a fight that you can't hope to win. I've killed you, that's all I've done. Perhaps tonight—perhaps a few days later."

He nodded gravely.

"And I've already killed your smile," she went on, looking down. "You don't smile any more the way you used to. You're not the boy you were when you came. Oh, to think of it—that it's all been my work. To kill your youth, to lead you into this slaughter pen where nothing—nothing lives but death—and hatred—and unhappiness."

The tears leaped to her eyes. He caught her hands and pressed them between his until pain came into her fingers. "Listen, Linda," he commanded. "She looked straight up at him. 'Are you sorry I came?'"

"More than I can tell you—for your sake."

"But when people look for the truth in this world, Linda, they don't take any one's sake into consideration. They balance all things and give them their true worth. Would you rather that you and I had never met—that I had never received Elmira's message—that you should live your life up here without ever hearing of me?"

She dropped her eyes. "It isn't fair—to ask me that—"

"Tell me the truth. Hasn't it been worth while? Even if we lose and die before this night is done, hasn't it all been worth while? Are you sorry you have seen me changed? Isn't the change for the better—a man grown instead of a boy? One who looks straight and sees clear?"

He studied her face; and after a while he found his answer. It was not in the form of words at first. As a man might watch a miracle he watched a new light come into her dark eyes. All the gloom and sorrow of the wilderness without could not affect its quality. It was a light of joy, of exultation, of new-found strength.

"You hadn't ought to ask me that, Bruce," she said with a rather strained distinctness. "It has been like being born again. There aren't any words to tell you what it has meant to me. And don't think I haven't seen the change in you, too—the birth of a new strength that every day is greater, higher—until it is—almost more than I can understand. The old smiles are gone, but something else has taken

their place—something much more dear to me—but what it is I can hardly tell you. Maybe it's something that the pines have."

But he hadn't wholly forgotten how to smile. His face lighted as remembrance came to him. "They are a different kind of smile—that's all," he explained. "Perhaps there will be many of them in the days to come. Linda, I have no regrets. I've played the game. Whether it was Destiny that brought me here, or only chance—or perhaps—if we take just life and death into consideration—just misfortune, whatever it is I feel no resentment toward it. It has been the worthwhile adventure. It seems to me that I can understand the whole world better than I used to. Maybe I can begin to see a big purpose and theme running through it all—but it's not yet clear enough to put into words. Certain things in this world are essential, certain other ones are froth. And I see which things belong to one class and which to another so much more clearly than I did before. One of the things that matters is throwing one's whole life into whatever task he has set out to do—whether he fails or succeeds doesn't seem greatly to matter. The main thing, it appears to me, is that he has tried. To stand strong and kind of calm, and not be afraid—if I can always do it, Linda, it is all I ask for myself. Not to flinch now. Not to give up as long as I have the strength for another step. And to have you with me—all the way."

"Then you and I—take fresh heart?"

"We've never lost heart, Linda."

"Not to give up, but only be glad we've tried?"

"Yes. And keep on trying."

"With no regrets?"

"None—and maybe to borrow a little strength from the pines!"

This was their new pact. To stand firm and strong and unflinching, and never to yield as long as an ounce of strength remained. As if to seal it, her arms crept about his neck and her soft lips pressed his.

CHAPTER XXV

Toward the end of the afternoon Linda saddled and rode down the trail toward Martin's store. She had considerable business to attend to. Among other things, she was going to buy thirty-three cartridges—all that Martin had in stock. She had some hope of securing an extra man or two with shells to match. The additional space in her pack was to be filled with provisions.

For she was faced with the unpleasant fact that her larder was nearly empty. The jerked venison was almost gone; only a little flour and a few canned things remained. She had space for only small supplies on the horse's back, and there would be no luxuries among them. Their fare had been plain up to this time; but from now on it was to consist of only such things as were absolutely necessary to sustain life.

She rode unarméd. Without informing him of the fact, the rifle had been left for Bruce. She did not expect for herself a rifle shot from ambush—for the simple reason that Simon had bidden otherwise—and Bruce might be attacked at any moment.

She was dreaming dreams, that day. The talk with Bruce had given her



She Was Dreaming Dreams.

fresh heart, and as she rode down the sunlit trail the future opened up entrancing vistas to her. Perhaps they yet could conquer, and that would mean re-establishment on the far-flung lands of her father. Matthew Folger had possessed a fertile farm also, and its green pastures might still be un-taken. It suddenly occurred to her that it would be of interest to turn off the main trail, take a little dirt path up the ridge that she had discovered years before, and look over these lands. The hour was early; besides, Bruce would find her report of the greatest interest.

She juzzed slowly along in the western fashion—which means something quite different from army fashion or sportsman fashion. Western riders do not post. Riding is not exercise to them; it is rest. They hang limp in the saddle, and all jer is taken up, as if by a spring, somewhere in the region of the floating ribs that only a physician can correctly designate. They never sit firm, these western riders, and as a rule their riding is not a particularly graceful thing to watch. But they do not care greatly about grace as long as they may encompass their fifty miles a day and still be fresh

enough for a country dance at night. There are many other differences in western and eastern riding, one of them being the way in which the horse is mounted. Another difference is the riding habit. Linda had no trim riding trousers, with tall, glossy boots, red coat and stock. It was rather doubtful whether she knew such things existed. She did, however, wear a trim riding skirt of khaki and a middle blouse washed spotlessly clean by her own hands; and no one would have missed the other things. It is an indisputable fact that she made a rather alluring picture—eyes bright and hair dark and strong arms bare to the elbow—as she came riding down the pine-needle trail.

She came to the opening of the dimmer trail and turned down it. She entered a still glen, and the color in her cheeks and the soft brown of her arms blended well with the new tints of the autumn leaves. Then she turned up a long ridge.

The trail led through an old burn—a bleak, eerie place where the fire had swept down the forest, leaving only strange, black pilings here and there—and she stopped in the middle of it to look down. The mountain world was laid out below her as clearly as in a relief map. Her eyes lighted as its beauty and its ferociousness went home to her, and her keen eyes slowly swept over the surrounding hill tops. Then for a long moment she sat very still in the saddle.

A thousand feet distant, on the same ridge on which she rode, she caught sight of another horse. It held her gaze, and in an instant she discerned the rather startling fact that it was saddled, bridled, and apparently tied to a tree. Momentarily she thought that its rider was probably one of the Turners who was at present at work on the old Folger farm; yet she knew at once the filled hands were still too far distant for that. She studied closely the mass of light and shadow of the underbrush and in a moment more distinguished the figure of the horseman.

It was one of the Turners—but he was not working in the fields. He was standing near the animal's head, back to her, and his rifle lay in his arms. And then Linda understood.

He was simply guarding the trail down to Martin's store. Except for the fact that she had turned off the main trail by no possibility could she have seen him and escaped whatever fate he had for her.

She held hard on her faculties and tried to puzzle it out. She understood now why the Turners had not as yet made an attack upon them at their home. It wasn't the Turner way to wage open warfare. They were the wolves that struck from ambush, the rattlesnakes that lunged with poisoned fangs from beneath the rocks. There was some severity for her in the Folger home, but none whatever here. There she had a strong man to fight for her, a loaded rifle, and under ordinary conditions the Turners could not hope to better them without at least some loss of life. For all they knew, Bruce had a large stock of rifles and ammunition—and the Turners did not look forward with pleasure to casualties in their ranks. The much simpler way was to watch the trail.

They had known that sooner or later one of them would attempt to ride down after either supplies or aid. Linda was a mountain girl and she knew the mountain methods of procedure; and she knew quite well what she would have had to expect if she had not discovered the ambush in time. She didn't think that the sentry would actually fire on her; he would merely shoot the horse from beneath her. It would be a simple feat by the least of the Turners—for these rambut men were marksmen, if nothing else. It wouldn't be in accord with Simon's plan or desire to leave her body lying still on the trail. But the horse killed, flight would be impossible, and what would transpire thereafter she did not dare to think. She had not forgotten Simon's threat in regard to any attempt to go down into the settlements. She knew that it still held good.

Of course, if Bruce made the excursion, the sentry's target would be somewhat different. He would shoot him down as remorselessly as he would shatter a box from a tree top.

The truth was that Linda had guessed just right. "It's the easiest way," Simon had said. "They'll be trying to get out in a very few days. If the man—shoot straight and to kill! If Linda, ping the horse and bring her here behind the saddle."

Linda turned softly, then started back. She did not even give a second thought to the fact of trying to break through. She watched the sentry look over her shoulder and saw him turn about. Far distant though he was, she could tell by the movement he made that he had discovered her.

She was almost four hundred yards away by then, and she pushed her horse into a gallop. The main error in her plan, a sound that came dim and strange through the burn, and then a bullet sent up a cloud of ashes a few feet to one side. But the range was too far even for the Turners, and she only urged her horse to a faster pace.

She flew down the narrow trail, vaulted into the main trail, and galloped wildly toward home. But the horse did not follow her. He valued his precious life too much for that. He had no intention of offering himself as a target to Bruce's rifle as he neared the house. He headed back to report to Simon.

Young Bill—for such had been the identity of the sentry—found his chief in the large field not far distant from where Bruce had been confined. The man was supervising the harvest of the fall growth of alfalfa. The two men

walked slowly away from the work, toward the fringe of woods.

"It looks as if we'll have to adopt rough measures, after all," Young Bill began.

Simon turned with flushing face. "Do you mean you let him get past you—and miss him? Young Bill, if you've done that—"

"Won't you wait till I've told you how it happened? It wasn't Bruce; it was Linda. For some reason I can't dope out, she went up in the big burn back of me and saw me—when I was too far off to shoot her horse. Then she rode back like a witch. They'll not take that trail again."

"It means one of two things," Simon said after a pause. "One of them is to starve 'em out. It won't take long. Their supplies won't last forever. The other is to call the clan and attack—"

"And that means loss of life."

"Not necessarily. I don't know how many guns you've got. If any of you were worth your salt, you'd find out those things. I wish Dave was here."

And Simon spoke the truth for once in his life; he did miss Dave. And it was not that there had been any love lost between them. But the truth was—although Simon never would have admitted it—the weaker man's cunning had been of the greatest aid to his chief. Simon needed it sorely now.

"And we can't wait till tomorrow night—because we've got the moon then," Young Bill added. "Just a new moon, but it will prevent a surprise attack. I suppose you still have hopes of Dave coming back?"

"I don't see why not. I'll venture to say now he's off on some good piece of business—doing something none of the rest of you have thought of. He'll come riding back one of these days with something actually accomplished. I see no reason for thinking that he's dead. Bruce hasn't had any chance at him that I know of. But if I thought he was—there'd be no more waiting. We'd tear down that nest tonight."

Simon spoke in his usual voice—with the same emphasis, the same undertones of passion. The truth was that he had slowly become aware that Young Bill was not giving him his full attention, but rather was gazing off—unfamiliar speculation in his eyes—toward the forests beyond.

Simon's impulse was to follow the gaze; yet he would not yield to it. "Well?" he demanded. "I'm not talking to amuse myself."

The younger man seemed to start. His eyes were half-closed; and there was a strange look of intentness about his facial lines when he turned back to Simon. "You haven't missed any stock?" he asked abruptly.

Simon's eyes widened. "No. Why?"

"Look there—over the forest," Young Bill pointed. Simon shuddered his eyes from the sunset glare and studied the pine-green skyline above the fringe of pines. There were many grotesque, black birds wheeling on slow wings above the spot. Now and then they dropped down, out of sight behind the trees.

"Buzzards!" Simon exclaimed.

"Yes," Young Bill answered quietly. "You see, it isn't much over a mile from Folger's house—in the deep woods. There's something dead there, Simon, and I think we'd better look to see what it is."

"You think—?" Then Simon hesitated and looked again with reddening eyes toward the gliding buzzards.

"I think—that maybe we're going to find Dave," Young Bill replied.

CHAPTER XXVI

The twilight at Trail's End is never long in duration, due to the simple fact that the mountains cut off the flood of light from the west after the setting of the sun, but tonight there seemed none at all. The reason was merely that heavy banks of clouds swept up from the southeast just after sunset.

They came with rather startling rapidity and almost immediately completely filled the sky. Young Bill had many things on his mind as he rode beneath them, yet he found time to gaze at

them with some curiosity. They were of singular greenish hue, and they hung so low that the tops of nearby mountains were obscured.

The fact that there would be no moon tonight was no longer important. The clouds would have cut off any tell-tale light that might illumine the activities of the Turners. There would not be even the dim mist of starlight.

Continued next week

IT'S TOASTED
one extra process
which gives a
delicious flavor

LUCKY STRIKE
CIGARETTE

WALDEN'S
MENTHOL COUGH DROPS
for nose and throat
Give Quick Relief