

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 temporarily to southern Oregon to meet "Linda."

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

CHAPTER III.—At his destination, Linda's maid, sends a message which has been sent to Bruce to receive Linda at the roadside. Linda's maid introduces the two to the roadside.

CHAPTER IV.—Leaving the train, Bruce is met at his apparent familiarity by Linda. Linda's maid, though to his knowledge she never been there.

CHAPTER V.—At the roadside, Bruce meets Mrs. Ross. Mrs. Ross's roadside store, she offers to be reaching Mrs. Ross's cabin.

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

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

CHAPTER VIII.—Through a country strangely 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 Fogees. Linda, occupied by the clan was stolen from the Fogees, and the family with the exception of Aunt Elmira (Mrs. Ross) and herself, wiped out by assassination. Bruce's father, Matthew Fogee, 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 headed his lands to Matthew Fogee, but the agreement, which would confer the enemy's claims to the property, had been lost.

CHAPTER X.—Bruce's mountain mood 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 trapper named Hudson, a witness to the agreement between Linda's father and Matthew Fogee.

CHAPTER XIII.—Hudson and Dave visit the former's traps. A wolf, caught in one, is discovered by the trapper. Hurtled at his feat, the brute strikes down Hudson. Bruce, on his way to Hudson, shoots and wounds the killer, driving him from the 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 imprints Linda and is struck down by the aged woman. Elmira's son has been murdered by Dave, and at her command, after securely binding the desperado, Linda leaves them alone.

CHAPTER XVI.—Returning, Bruce finds a note, presumably 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 grizzly and the probable slaying of Bruce by the animal.

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

CHAPTER XX.—Dave Turner, sent by Simon, brings 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.

Young Bill rode from house to house through the estate—the homes occupied by Simon's brothers and cousins and their respective families. He knocked on each door and he only gave one little message. "Simon wants you at the house," he said, "and come holed."

He would turn to go, but always a singular quiet and breathlessness remained in the homes after his departure. There would be a curious exchange of glances and certain significant sounds. One of them was the metallic click of cartridges being slipped into the magazine of a rifle. Another was the buckling of a spur, and perhaps the rattle of a pistol in its holster. Before the night fell in reality, the clan came riding—strange, tall figures in the half-darkness—straight for Simon's house.

His horse was saddled, too, and he met them in front of his door. And in a very few words he made all things plain to them.

"We've found Dave," he told them simply. "Most of you already know it. We've decided there isn't any use of waiting any more. We're going to the Fogee house tonight."

The men stood silent, breathing hard. Simon spoke very quietly, yet his voice carried far. In their growing excitement they did not observe the reason that a puzzling deep calm had come over the whole wilderness world. Even in the quietest night there is usually a faint background of winds in the mountain ranges—troubled breaths that whisper in the thickets and rustle the dead leaves—but tonight the heavy air had no breath of life.

"Tonight Bruce Fogee is going to pay the price, just as I said." He spoke rather hesitatingly; perhaps more to his followers than from impulse. "See, the passion that he feels for the room for his usual arm." "Fire on sight, Bill and I will come from the rear, and we will push through the back door the minute you break through the front. The rest of you surround the house on three sides. And remember—no man is to touch Linda."

They nodded grimly; then the file of horsemen started toward the ridge. Far distant they heard a sound such as had reached them often in summer, but was unfamiliar in fall. It was the faint rumble of distant thunder.

Bruce and Linda sat in the front room of the Fogee house, quiet and watchful and unafraid. It was not that they did not realize their danger. They had simply taken all possible measures of defense; and they were waiting for what the night would bring forth.

"I know they'll come tonight," Linda had said. "Tomorrow night there will be a moon, and though it won't give much light, it will hurt their chances of success. Besides—they've found that their other plot—to kill you from ambush—isn't going to work."

Bruce nodded and got up to examine the shutters. He wanted no ray of light to steal out into the growing darkness and make a target. It was a significant fact that the rifle did not occupy its usual place behind the desk. Bruce kept it in his hands as he made the inspection. Linda had her empty pistol, knowing that it might—in the mayhap of circumstance—be of aid in frightening an assailant. Old Elmira sat beside the fire, her stiff fingers busy at a piece of sewing.

"You know—" Bruce said to her, "that we are expecting an attack tonight?"

The woman nodded, but didn't miss a stitch. No gleam of interest came into her eyes. Bruce's gaze fell to her work basket, and something glittered from its depth. Evidently Elmira had regained her knife.

He went back to his chair beside Linda, and the two sat listening. They had never known a more quiet night. They listened in vain for the little night sounds that usually come stealing, so hushed and tremulous, from the forest. And they both started, over so slightly, when they heard a distant rumble of thunder.

"It's going to storm," Linda told him.

"Yes, a thunderstorm—rather unusual in the fall, isn't it?"

"Almost unknown. It's growing cold, too."

They waited a breathless minute, then the thunder spoke again. It was immeasurably nearer. It was as if it had leaped toward them, through the darkness, with incredible speed in the minute that intervened. The last echo of the sound was not dead when they heard it a third time.

The storm swept toward them and increased in fury. On a distant hill-side the strange file that was the Turners' march, then gathered around Simon. Already the lightning made vivid, white flashes in the sky and illumined the breathless instant—the long sweep of the ridge above them. "We'll take our last targets in the lightning," said Bill.

"Right on," Simon ordered. "You can't miss if you can't hit a target in the lightning. We're not going to turn back now."

They rode on. Far away they heard the whir and roar of wind, and in a moment it was upon them. The forest was no longer silent. The peal of the thunder was almost continuous.

The breaking of the storm seemed to rock the Fogee house on its foundation. Both Linda and Bruce leaped to their feet; but they felt a little tingle of awe when they saw that old Elmira still sat sewing. It was as if the calm that dwelt in the Sentinel Pine outside had come down to abide in her. No force that the world possessed could ever take it from her.

They heard the rumble and creak of the trees as the wind moaned them,

and the flame of the lamp danced wildly, filling the room with flickering shadows. Bruce straightened, the lines of his face setting deep. He glanced once more at the rifle in his hands.

"Linda," he said, "put out that fire. If there's going to be an attack, we'd have a better chance if the room was in darkness. We can shoot through the door then."

She obeyed at once, knocking the burning sticks apart and drenching them with water. She took off the glass shade of the lamp, and the little gusts of wind that crept in the cracks of the windows immediately extinguished the flame. The darkness dropped down. Then Bruce opened the door.

The whole wilderness world struggled in the grasp of the storm. The scene was such that no mortal memory could possibly forget. They saw it in great, vivid glimpses in the intermittent flashes of the lightning, and the world seemed no longer that which they had come to know. Chaos was upon it. The tall tops of the trees wagged back and forth in frenzied signals; their branches smote and rubbed together. And just without their door the Sentinel Pine stood with top lifted to the fury of the storm.

A strange awe swept over Bruce. A moment later he was to behold a sight that for the moment would make him completely forget the existence of the great tree; but for an instant he poised at the brink of a profound and far-reaching discovery. There was a great lesson for him in that dark, terrifying figure that the lightning revealed. Its great limbs moved and spoke; its top swayed back and forth, yet still it held its high place as Sentinel of the Forest, passionless, patient, talking through the murk of clouds to the stars that burned beyond.

"See," Linda said. "The Turners are coming!"

It was true. Bruce dropped his eyes. Even now the clan had spread out in a great wing and was bearing down upon the house. The lightning showed them in strange, vivid flashes. Bruce nodded slowly.

"I'm ready," he answered.

"Then shoot them, quick—when the lightning shows them," she whispered in his ear. "They're in range now." Her hand seized his arm. "What are you waiting for?"

He turned to her sternly. "Have you forgotten we only have five shells?" he asked. "Go back to Elmira."

Her eyes met his, and she tried to smile into them.

"Forgive me, Bruce—it's hard—to be calm."

But at once she understood why he was waiting. The flashes of lightning offered no opportunity for an accurate shot. Bruce meant to conserve his little supply of shells until the moment of utmost need. The clan drew nearer. They were riding slowly, with ready rifles. And over the storm increased in fury. The thunder was so close that it no longer gave the impression of being merely sound. It was a veritable explosion just above their heads. The first drops of rain fell one by one on the roof.

Bruce's eyes sought for Simon's figure. To Simon he owed the greatest debt, and to lay Simon low might mean to disarm the whole clan. But although the attackers were in fair range now, scarcely two hundred yards away, he could not identify him. They drew closer. He raised his gun, waiting for a chance to fire. And at that instant a restlessness hurled him to the floor.

There was the sense of vast catastrophe, a great rocking and shuddering that was lost in billowing waves of sound; and then a frantic effort to recall his wandering faculties. A blinding light cut the darkness in twain; it smote his eyeballs as if with a physical blow; and summoning all his powers of will he sprang to his feet.

There was only darkness at first; and he did not understand. But it was scarcely less duration than the flash of lightning. A red flame suddenly leaped into the air, roared and grew and spread as if scattered by the wind itself. And Bruce's breath caught in a sob of wonder.

The Sentinel Pine, that ancient friend and counselor that stood not over one hundred feet from the house, had been struck by a lightning bolt. Its trunk had been cleft open as if by a giant's ax, and the flame was already springing through its balsam-laden branches.

CHAPTER XXVII

Bruce stood as if entranced, gazing with awed face at the flaming tree. There was little danger of the house itself catching fire. The wind blew the flame in the opposite direction; besides, the rains were beating on the roof. The fire in the great tree itself, however, was too well started to be extinguished at once by any kind of rainfall; but it did burn with less fierceness.

Only he felt the girl's hand grasping at his arm. Her fingers pressed until he felt pain. His eyes lowered to hers. The sight of that passion-driven face—recurring in an instant the scene beside the camp fire his first night at Trail's End—called him to himself. "Shoot, you fool!" she stamped at him. "The tree's litged up the whole countryside, and you can't miss. Shoot them before they run away."

He glanced quickly out. The clan that had drawn within sixty yards of the house at the time the lightning struck had been thrown into confusion. Their horses had been knocked down by the force of the bolt and were fleeing, riderless, away. The men followed them, shouting, plainly revealed in the light from the burning tree. The great

torch beside the house had completely turned the tables. And Linda spoke true; they offered the best of targets. Again the girl's eyes were lurid slits between the lids. Her lips were drawn, and her breathing was strange. He looked at her calmly.

"No, Linda, I can't!" "You can't!" she cried. "You can't!"



"You Can't!" She Cried. "You Can't!—You Traitor! Kill—Kill Them While There's Time!"

ard—you traitor! Kill—kill—kill them while there's time!"

She saw the resolve in his face, and she snatched the rifle from his hands. She hurried it to her shoulder and three times fired blindly toward the retreating Turners.

At that instant Bruce seemed to come to life. His thoughts had been clear ever since the tree had been struck; his vision was straighter and more far-reaching than ever in his life before, but now his muscles weakened, too. He sprang toward the girl and snatched the rifle from her hand. She fought for it, and he held her with a strong arm.

"Wait—wait, Linda," he said gently. "You've wasted three cartridges now. There are only two left. And we may need them some other time."

He held her from him with his arm; and it was as if his strength flowed into her. Her blazing eyes sought his, and for a long second their wills battled. And then a deep wonder seemed to come over her.

"What is it?" she breathed. "What have you found out?"

She spoke to a strange and distant voice. Slowly the fire died in her eyes, the drawn features relaxed, her hands fell at her side. He drew her away from the lighted doorway, out of the range of any of the Turners that should turn to answer the rifle fire. The wind roared over the house and swept by in clamorous fury, the electric storm dimmed and lessened as it journeyed on.

These two knew that if death spared them in all the long passage of their years, they could never forget that moment. The girl watched him breathlessly, oblivious to all things else. He seemed wholly unaware of her now. There was something aloof, impassive, infinitely calm about him, and a great, far-reaching understanding was in his eyes. Her own eyes suddenly filled with tears.

"Linda, there's something come to me—and I don't know that I can make you understand. I can only call it strength—a new strength and a greater strength than I ever had before. It's something that the pine—that great tree that we just saw split open—has been trying to tell me for a long time. Oh, can't you see, Linda? There it stood, hundreds of years—a great, so tall, so wise—in a moment broken like a reed. It takes away my arrogance, Linda. It makes me see myself as I really am. And that means—Power."

His eyes blazed, and he caught her hands in his.

"It was a symbol, Linda, not only of the wilderness, but of powers higher and greater than the wilderness. Powers that can look down, and not be swept away by passion, and not try to tear to pieces those who in their folly harm them. There's no room for such things as vengeance in this new strength. There's no room for murder, and malice, and hatred, and bloodshed."

Linda understood. She knew that this new-found strength did not mean re-annulment of her cause. It did not mean that he would give over his attempt to reinstatement as the owner of her father's estate; it only meant that the impulse of personal vengeance was dead within him. He knew now—the same as ever—that the duty of the man that dwelt upon the earth is to do their allotted tasks, and without hatred and without passion, to overcome the difficulties that stand in the way. She realized that if one of the Turners should leap through the door and attack her, Bruce would kill him without mercy or regret. She knew that he would make every effort to bring the offenders to the law. But the ability to shoot a fleeing enemy in the back, because of wrongs done long ago, was past.

Bruce's vision had come to him. He knew that if vengeance had been the creed of the powers that ruled the world, the sphere would have been destroyed with fire long since. To stand firm and straight and unflinching; not to judge, not to condemn, not to resent; this was true strength.

"I know," the girl said, her thoughts

wandering afar. "Perhaps the name for it all is—tolerance." "And possibly it is only—worship!"

The Turners had gone. The dimming lightning revealed the entire attacking party half a mile distant and 99% of rifle range on the ridge; and Bruce and Linda stole together out into the storm.

The green foliage of the tree had already burned away, but some of the upper branches still glowed against the dark sky. A fallen branch smoldered on the ground, hissing in the rain, and it lighted their way.

Awed and mystified, Bruce halted before the ruin of the great tree. He had almost forgotten the stress of the moment just passed. It did not even occur to him that some of his enemies, unseen before, might still be lurking in the shadow, watching for a chance to harm. They stood a moment in silence. Then Bruce uttered one little gasp and stretched his arm into the hollow that the cleft in the trunk had revealed.

The light from a burning branch behind him had shown him a small, dark object that had evidently been inserted in the hollow tree trunk through some little aperture that had either since been closed up or they had never observed. It was a leathern wallet, and Bruce opened it under Linda's startled gaze. He drew out a single white paper.

He held it in the light, and his glance swept down its lines of faded



And the Triumph on Bruce's Face Changed to a Singular Look of Wonder.

ink. Then he looked up with brightening eyes.

"What is it?" she asked.

"The secret agreement between your father and mine," he told her simply. "And we've won."

He watched her eyes brighten. It seemed to him that nothing life had ever offered had given him the same pleasure. It was a moment of triumph. But before half of its long seconds were gone, it became a moment of despair.

A rifle spoke from the covert beyond—one sharp, angry note that rose distinct and penetrating above the noise of the distant thunder. A little tongue of fire darted, like a snake's head, in the darkness. And the triumph on Bruce's face changed to a singular look of wonder.

CHAPTER XXVIII

To Simon, the night had seemingly ended in triumph, after all. It had looked dark for a while. The bolt of lightning, setting fire to the pine, had deranged all of his plans. His men had been thrown from their horses, the blazing pine tree had left them exposed to fire from the house, and they had not yet caught their mounts and rallied. Young Bill and himself, however, had tied their horses before the lightning had struck and had lingered in the thickets in front of the house for just such a chance as had been given them.

He had not understood why Bruce had not opened fire on the fleeing Turners. He wondered if his enemy were out of ammunition. The tragedy of the Sentinel Pine and had no meaning for him; and he had held his rifle cocked and ready for the instant that Bruce had shown himself.

Young Bill had heard his little exultant gasp when Linda and Bruce had come out into the freight. Plainly they had kept track of all the attacking party that had been visible, and supposed that all their enemies had gone. He felt the movement of Simon's strong arms as he grasped the rifle. These arms were never steady in the darkness; the lightning flash could not see his face, but his eyes twinkled with cunning cunning. The eyes were narrowed and red, the lines cut deep about the blood-mingled lips, and mercy was as far from him as from the killer who hunted on the distant ridge.

But Simon didn't fire at once. The two were coming steadily toward him, and the nearer they were the better his chance of success in the steady light. He sat as breathless as a whistling free from telltale motion as a puma who waits in ambush for an approaching deer. He meant to take careful aim. It was his big chance, and he intended to make the most of it.

The two had halted beside the ruined pine, but for a moment Simon held his fire. They stood rather close together; he wanted to wait until

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