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The Strength of the Pines

By Edison Marshall

Author of "The Voice of the Pack"

Illustrations by Irwin Myers

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SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I.—At the death of his foster father, Bruce Dupont, in an eastern city, receives a mysterious message, sent by a Mrs. Ross, summoning him promptly to a certain Greenway near Linda.

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

CHAPTER III.—At his destination, Trull's End, news that a message has been sent to Bruce is received with excited interest by a man introduced to the reader as "Simon."

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

CHAPTER V.—In answer to the message, Bruce makes his way to Martin's cross-road store, the address as 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 of 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 kidnaped from the orphanage and brought to the mountains. Linda's father had deserted 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-feud.

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

CHAPTER XIII.—Hudson and Dave visit the former's trap. A wolf, caught in one, is discovered by the trapper. Disturbed at his feat, the brute strikes down Hudson. Bruce, 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, after securely binding the desperate, Linda leaves them alone.

CHAPTER XVI.—Returning, Bruce finds a note, presumably from Linda, telling him she has been kidnaped 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-feud, 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 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.

they might make some sort of shelter and keep life in their bodies until the snow ceased and they could find their way.

The cold was deepening, the storm was increasing in fury. Bruce's bones ached, his wounded arm felt numb and strange, the frost was getting into his lungs. There was no hope of the storm decreasing, rather it was steadily growing worse. The tracks grew more dim, and he began to be afraid that the falling flakes would obscure his own foot-prints so that he could not find his way back to Linda. And he knew, beyond all other knowledge, that he wanted her with him when the shadows dropped down for good and all. He wanted her arms about him; the fight would be easier then.

"Oh, what's the use?" he suddenly said to the wind. "Why not give up and go back?"

He halted in the trail and started to turn. But at that instant a banner of wind swept down into his face, and the eddy of snow in front of him was brushed from his gaze. Just for the space of a breath the canyon for a hundred feet distant was partially cleared of the blinding streamers of snow. And he uttered a long gasp when he saw, thirty yards distant and at the furthest reaches of his sight, the figure of a saddled horse.

His gun leaped to his shoulder, yet his eagerness did not cost him his self-control. He gazed quietly along the sights until he saw the animal's shoulder back against the trigger.

The horse rocked down, seemingly instantly killed, and the snow swept in between. Bruce cried out in triumph. Then he broke into a run and sped through the furies toward his dead.

But it came about that there was other business for Bruce than the recovery of his blankets that he had supposed would be tied to the saddle. The snow was thick between, and he was within twenty feet of the animal's body before he glimpsed it clearly again. And he felt the first wave of wonder, the first promptings of the thought that the horse he had shot down was not his, but one that he had never seen before.

But there was no time for the thought to go fully home. Some one cried out—a strange, half-earnest of hatred and triumph that was almost lacking in all human quality—and a man's body leaped toward him from the thicket before which the horse had fallen. It was Simon, and Bruce had mistaken his horse for the one he had ridden.

Even in that instant crisis he did not forget that he had as yet neglected to expel the empty cartridge from the barrel of his rifle and to throw in the other from the magazine. He tried to get the gun to his shoulder, working the lever at the same time. But Simon's leap was too fast for him. His strong hand seized the barrel of the gun and snatched it from his hands. Then the assailant threw it back, over his shoulder, and it fell softly in the snow. He waited, crouched.

The two men stood face to face at last. All things else were forgot-



The Two Men Stood Face to Face at Last.

ten. The world they had known before—a world of sorrow and pleasures, of mountains and woods and homes—faded out and left no realities except each other's presence.

All about them were the snow furies that their eyes could not penetrate, and it was as if they were two lone contestants on an otherwise uninhabited sphere who had come to grips at last. The falling snow gave the whole picture a curious tone of unreality and dimness.

Bruce straightened, and his face was of iron. "Well, Simon," he said. "You've come."

The man's eyes burned red through the snow. "Of course I would. Did you think you could escape me?"

"It didn't much matter whether I escaped you or not," Bruce answered rather quietly. "Neither one of us is going to escape the storm and the cold. I suppose you know that."

"I know that one of us is. Because one of us is going out—a more direct way—first. Which one that is doesn't much matter." His great hands clasped. "Bruce, when I snatched your gun right now I could have done more. I could have sprung a few feet farther and had you around the waist—taken by surprise. The fight would have been already over. I think I could have done more than

that, even—with my own rifle as you came up. It's lying there, just beside the horse."

But Bruce didn't turn his eyes to look at it. He was waiting for the attack.

"I could have snatched your life just as well, but I wanted to wait," Simon went on. "I wanted to say a few words first, and wanted to master you—not by surprise—but by superior strength alone."

It came into Bruce's mind he could tell Simon of the wound near his shoulder, how because of it no fight between them would be a fair test of superiority, yet the words didn't come to his lips. He could not ask mercy of this man, either directly or indirectly, any more than the pines asked mercy of the snows that covered them.

"You were right when you said there is no escaping from this storm," Simon went on. "But it doesn't much matter. It's the end of a long war, and what happens to the victor is neither here nor there. It seems all the more fitting that we should meet just as we have—at the very brink of death—and death should be waiting at the end for the one of us who survives. It's so like this old, terrible wilderness in which we live."

Bruce gazed in amazement. The dark and dreadful poetry of this man's nature was coming to the fore. The wind made a strange echo to his words—a long, wild shriek as it swept over the heads of the pines.

"Then why are you waiting?" Bruce asked.

"So you can understand everything. But I guess that time is here. There is to be no mercy at the end of this fight, Bruce; I ask none and will give none. You have waged a war against me, you have escaped me many times, you have won the love of the woman I love—and this is to be my answer."

His voice dropped a note, and he spoke more quietly. "I'm going to kill you, Bruce."

"Then try it," Bruce answered steadily. "I'm in a hurry to go back to Linda."

Simon's smoldering wrath blazed up at the words. Both men seemed to spring at the same time. Their arms flared, then interlocked; and they rocked a long time—back and forth in the snow.

For the first time Bruce had full realization of Simon's mighty strength. With all the power of his body he tried to wrench him off his feet, but it was like trying to tear a tree from the ground.

But surprise at the other's power was not confined to Bruce alone. Simon knew that he had an opponent worthy of the iron of his own muscles, and he put all his terrible might into the battle. He tried to reach Bruce's throat, but the man's strong shoulder held the arm against his side. Simon's great hand reached to pin Bruce's arm, and for the first time he discovered the location of his weakness.

He saw the color sweep from Bruce's face and water drops that were not melted snow come upon it. It was all the advantage needed between such evenly matched contestants. And Simon forgot his spoken word that he wished this fight to be a test of superiority alone. His fury swept over him like a flood and offset all things else; and he centered his whole attack upon Bruce's wound.

In a moment he had him down, and he struck once into Bruce's white face with his terrible knuckles. The blow sent a strange sickness through the younger man's frame; and he tried vainly to struggle to his feet. "Fight! Fight on!" was the message his mind dispatched along his nerves to his tortured muscles, but for an instant they wholly refused to respond. They had endured too much. Total unconsciousness hovered above him, ready to descend.

Strangely, he seemed to know that Simon had crouched from his body and was even now reaching some dreadful weapon that lay beside the dead form of the horse. In an instant he had it, and Bruce's eyes opened in time to see him swing it aloft. It was his rifle, and Simon was aiming a murderous blow at him with its stock.

There was no chance to ward it off. No human skull could withstand its shattering impact.

But that war of life and death in the far reaches of Trull's End was not to end so soon. At that instant there was an amazing intervention.

A great gray form came lunging out of the snow furies. Their vision was limited to a few feet, and so fast the creature came, with such incredible, smashing power, that he was upon them in a breath. It was the Killer in the full glory of the chase; and he had caught up with them at last.

Bruce saw only his great figure looming just over him. Simon, with amazing agility, leaped to one side just in time, then battered down the rifle stock with all his strength. But the blow was not meant for Bruce. It struck where aimed—the great gray shoulder of the grizzly.

Then, dimmed and half-obscured by the snow furies, there began a strange a battle as the great pines above them had ever beheld. The Killer's rage was upon him, and the blow at the shoulder had arrested his charge for a moment only. Then he was whirled, a snarling, fighting monster, with death for any living creature in the blow of his forearm, and lunged toward Simon again.

It was the Killer at his grandest. Simon had no chance to snatch his rifle. In the instant that he would raise it those great claws and fangs would be upon him. He swung it as a club, striking again and again, dodging the sledge-hammer blows and

(Continued next week.)

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