

The Strength of the Pines

By Edison Marshall

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"The Voice of the Pack"

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SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I.—At the death of his father, Bruce Dunlop, in an eastern city, receives a mysterious message, sent by Mrs. Ross, summoning him parentally to southern Oregon—to meet Linda.

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

CHAPTER III.—At his destination, Linda tells him that a message has been sent to Bruce by a man introduced to the man.

CHAPTER IV.—Leaving the train, Bruce is at his apparent familiarity with the man, though he never knew him.

CHAPTER V.—Bruce is sent to the man's home, where he is introduced to Mrs. Ross.

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

CHAPTER VII.—Mrs. Ross, aged and infirm, welcomes him with sympathy. She tells him of the man who introduced him to her.

CHAPTER VIII.—Through a country journey, Bruce and Linda journey, and find his childhood playmate, Linda.

CHAPTER IX.—The girl tells him of wrongs committed by an enemy clan of the family, the Rosses. Linda, adopted by the clan, was taken from her home, and the family, with the exception of Aunt Elvira, were killed. Bruce's father, Matthew Folger, was one of the victims. His mother had with Linda and Linda. The girl, while small, had been kidnapped from the orphanage and brought to the mountains. Linda's father had killed her lands to Matthew Folger, but the agreement, which would confer the property on the property, had been lost.

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

CHAPTER XI.—A sharp frost, the first of the season, is in front of Linda's cabin, and Bruce's excited imagination is quickened to a new message.

CHAPTER XII.—Bruce sets out in search of a stranger named "Simon," who is supposed to be the man who introduced him to the man.

CHAPTER XIII.—Hudson and Dave visit the former's cabin, and find a note, which is discovered by the Killer. Disturbed at his feat, the brute strikes down Hudson. Bruce, on his way to Linda's cabin, and would the Killer drive him from his victim. Hudson, leaving Linda's cabin, tries to tell the holding 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, seeing Linda and Aunt Elvira, and a stranger, is struck down by the man. Linda's son has been murdered by Dave. After a short time, after a short time, Linda leaves them alone.

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

CHAPTER XVII.—Bruce, following the man's trail, and is made prisoner.

CHAPTER XVIII.—Charging Bruce with attempting to rescue the blood-destiny, the clan, after a mock trial, decides to have him bound, and a prisoner, and send where the Killer had slain and left alone 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 grizzly attack, 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 a secret place, where 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. Simon, the man, then strikes her and leaves. The girl is confident he will go to Bruce, and she follows him.

CHAPTER XXIII.—Her surmise is correct. Simon, visiting his helpless enemy, to float over him with the Killer, actually sitting at Bruce's body. Linda, on horseback, arrives, wounds the animal, and carries her lover away.

CHAPTER XXIV.—Despite their apparent helplessness, Bruce and Linda decide to keep up the fight.

CHAPTER XXV.—Seeking to make her way to Martin's store for ammunition, Linda is fired on and turned back.

CHAPTER XXVI.—The Turner clan, in a terrible thunderstorm, attack the Folger home. The grizzly, fired at by lightning and set on fire.

CHAPTER XXVII.—The noise and flames startle the attackers' horses and they scatter. In the half-conscious track of the grizzly, Linda and Bruce find the grizzly, and at the moment of Simon's triumph he is attacked by the Killer. After a fierce combat the grizzly ends Simon's career of crime.

CHAPTER XXVIII.—Simon had been a witness to the finding of the paper and it was his rifle that spoke. Linda, pale from the shock, is not badly hurt. Despite the lightning, the two mount the one horse, with the intention of making their way to the settlements.

CHAPTER XXIX.—In the storm Linda and Bruce lose the trail. While the grizzly, their horse breaks away.

CHAPTER XXX.—Bruce, forced to leave Linda, starts after the animal. The Killer appears and follows him. Bruce comes upon Simon, and a fight to the death ensues. Weakened by his wound, Bruce is overcome, but at the moment of Simon's triumph he is attacked by the Killer. After a fierce combat the grizzly ends Simon's career of crime.

CHAPTER XXXI.—The light comes, and the Killer, apparently perturbed, leaves his victim. Linda, with an inspiration that the brute is making his way to his hiding-place. They follow him. Her surmise is correct, and at the moment of his entry into a cave, Bruce, with his last strength, slays the animal. Shelter and food assured, the two await the end of the winter, and their victory. In that perfect understanding which had come to them in their peril and strife.

In an unfamiliar voice. "It's the horse that—Dave Turner rode here—and he won't want him any more."

Linda took the rein, passed it over the horse's head, and started to swing into the saddle. Then she turned with a gasp as the woman slipped something into her hand.

Linda looked down and saw it was the hilt of the knife that Elvira had carried with her when the two women had gone with Dave into the woods. The blade glittered; but Linda was



The Blade Glittered, but Linda Was Afraid to Look at It Closely.

afraid to look at it closely. "You might need that, too," the old woman said. "It may be wet—I can't remember. But take it, anyway."

Linda hardly heard. She thrust the blade into the leather of the saddle, then swung on the horse.

She rode swiftly until she began to fear Simon might hear the hoof beat of her mount; then she drew up to a walk. And when she had created the hill and had followed down its long slope into the glen, the moon went under the clouds for the first time.

She lost sight of Simon at once. Seemingly her effort to save Bruce had come to nothing, after all. But she didn't turn back. There were light patches in the sky, and the moon might shine forth again.

She followed down the trail toward the cleared lands that the Turners cultivated. She went to their very edge. It was a rather high point, so she waited here for the moon to emerge again. Never, it seemed to her, had it moved so slowly. But all at once its light flowed forth over the land.

Her eyes searched the distant space, but she could catch no glimpses of Simon between the trees. Evidently he no longer walked in the direction of the house. Then she looked out over the tilted lands.

Almost a quarter of a mile away she saw the flicker of a miniature shadow. Only the vivid quality of the moonlight, against which any shadow was clear-cut and sharp, enabled her to discern it at all. It was Simon, and evidently his business had taken him into the meadows. Feeling that she was on the right track at last, she urged her horse forward again, keeping to the shadow of the timber at first.

Simon walked almost parallel to the dark fringe for nearly a mile; then turned off into the tilted fields. She rode opposite him and reined in the horse to watch.

When the distance had almost obscured him, she saw him stop. He waited a long time, then turned back. The moon went in and out of the clouds. Then, trusting to the distance to conceal her, Linda rode slowly out into the clearing.

Simon reentered the timber, his inspection seemingly done, and Linda still rode in the general direction he had gone. A curious sense of impending events came over her as she headed on toward the distant wall of forest beyond.

Then the clouds slowly dimming under the moon, the light grew with almost imperceptible encroachment. At first it was only bright enough to show her own dim shadow on the grass. The utter gloom that was over the fields lessened and drew away like receding curtains; her vision reached ever further, the shadows grew more clearly outlined and distinct. Then the moon rolled forth into a wholly open patch of sky—a white sphere with a sprinkling of vivid stars around it—and the silver radiance poured down.

It was like the breaking of dawn. The fields stretched to incredible distances about her. The forest beyond emerged in distinct outline; she could see every irregularity in the plain and in one instant's glance she knew that she had found Bruce.

His situation went home to her in one sweep of the eyes. Bruce was not alone. Even now a great, towering figure was creeping toward him from the forest. Linda cried out and with the long strap of her rein lashed her horse into the fastest pace it knew.

Bruce did not hear her cry. He lay in the soft grass, waiting for death. A great calm had come upon him; a strange, quiet strength that the pines themselves might have lent him; and he made no cry. In the dreadful last moment of despair the worst of his terror had gone and left his thoughts singularly clear. And but one desire was left to him: that the Killer might be powerful and cruel, yet not so cruel as to kill 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 horse whined, 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 farthest reaches of his sight, the figure of a saddled horse.

His gun leaped to his shoulder, yet his eagerness did not quiet him his self-control. He gazed quietly along the eddies until he saw the animal's shadow between them. His finger pressed back against the trigger.

The horse reared down, seemingly instantly lifted, and the snow swept in between. Bruce cried out in triumph. Then he broke into a run and sped through the dunes toward his goal.

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-heard of halloo 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 load the empty cartridge from the barrel of his rifle and to throw it 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 hand was too fast for him. His strong hand seized the barrel of the gun and snatched it from his hands. Then the assassin 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 forgotten.

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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 was 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 as like this—A, a 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.

"When 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 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 flailed, then interlocked; and they rolled 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 lion 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 grip Bruce's arm, and for the first time he discovered the breadth of his weakness.

He saw the other swing from Bruce's arm and water drops that were not melted from snow 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 he fought all things else; and he centered his whole attack upon Bruce's wound.

In a twinkling he had him down, and he struck once into Bruce's white flesh with his terrible knuckles. The blow sent a strange shudder 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 close to him, ready to descend.

Strangely, he seemed to know that Simon had crept 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 snatching it aloft. It was his rifle, and Simon was glancing at it with a look of triumph.

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

But that was of little and small use in the remotest of Linda's End was not to be so soon. At that instant there was an amazing intervention.

A great cry from some lair issuing out of the snow flurries. 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 change; and he had caught up with them at last.

Bruce saw only his great figure bounding 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 flurries, there began a strange battle as the great pines above them had over before. The Killer's rage was upon him, and the blow at the shoulder had severed his chance for a moment only. Then he was rebuffed, a snarling, fighting monster, with death for any living creature in the blow of his forehead, and lunged toward Simon again.

It was the Killer at his grimmest. Simon had no chance to shoot 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

springing aside in the second of the Killer's lunges. He was fighting for his life, and no eye could bemean that effort.

Simon himself seemed exalted, and for once it appeared that the grizzly had found an opponent worthy of his might. They were of one kind, and they seemed to understand each other. The lust and passion and fury of battle were upon them both.

The scene hurried back to the young days of the world, when man and beast battled for dominance. Nothing had changed. The forest stood grave and silent, just the same. The elements warred against them from the clouds—that ancient strife that has made of existence a travel and a scourge. Man and beast and storm—these three great foes were arrayed the same as ever. Two swung backward a thousand-thousand years.

The snow seemed to come from all directions in great clouds and flurries and streamers, and time after time a wholly hid the contestants from

not here as well as anywhere else?"

The horse on which was tied their scanty blankets was miles away by now; its tracks were obscured in the snow, and they could not find their way to any shelter that might be concealed among the ridges.

But before the question was finished, a strange note had come into his voice. It was as if his attention had been called from his words by something much more momentous. The truth was that it had been caught and held by a curious expression on the girl's face. All at once she sprang to her feet.

"Bruce!" she cried. "Perhaps there's a way yet. A long long chance, but maybe a way yet. Get your rifle—Simon's is broken—and come with me!"

Without waiting for him to rise she struck off into the storm, following the huge footprints of the bear. The man struggled with himself, summoning all that was left of his reserve money of strength, and leaped up. He snatched his rifle from the ground where Simon had thrown it, and in an instant was beside her. Her cheeks were blazing. Her cheeks were blazing.

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"Maybe it just means further torture," she confessed to him, "but don't you want to make every effort we can to save ourselves? Don't you want to fight till the last breath?"

She glanced up and saw her answer in the growing strength of his face. Then his words spoke too. "As long as the slightest chance remains," he replied.

"And you'll forgive me if it comes to nothing?"

He smiled dimly. She took fresh heart when she saw he still had strength enough to smile. "You don't have to ask me that."

"A moment ago an idea came to me—it came so straight and sure it was as if a voice told me," she explained breathlessly. She didn't look at him again. She kept her eyes intent upon the great footprints in the snow. To miss them for a second meant, in that world of whirling snow, to lose them forever. "It was after the bear had killed Simon and had gone away. He acted exactly as if he thought of something and went out to do it—exactly as if he had a destination in view. Didn't you see—his anger seemed to die in him and he started off in the face of the storm. I've watched the ways of animals too long not to know that he had something in view. It wasn't food; he would have attacked the body of the horse, or even Simon's body. If he had just been running away or wandering, he would have gone with the wind, not against it. He was weakened from the fight—perhaps dying—and I think—"

He finished the sentence for her, breathlessly. "That he's going toward shelter."

"Yes, you know, Bruce—the bears hibernate every year. That's my one hope now—that the Killer has gone to some cave he knows about to hibernate until this storm is over. I think from the way he started off so sure and so straight, that it's near. It would be dry and out of the storm, and if we could take it away from him we could make a fire that the snow wouldn't put out. It would mean life—and we could go on when the storm is over."

"You remember—we have only one cartridge."

"Yes, I know of it, and you know it. It's only a cartridge, after all. It's a risk—a risk as big as we've ever run. But it's a chance."

"They talked no more. Instead, they walked as fast as they could into the face of the storm. They walked much more swiftly than the bear, and they could tell by the appearance of the tracks that they were but a few yards behind him."